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WATER CRISIS

Simon Cooper listens to the sound of sliding bolts



A S I WRITE, SOUTHERN WATER HAS just imposed a hosepipe ban, the first in ten years. The words horse/bolt/stable/door immediately spring to mind. Do they actually employ any hydrologists at Southern Water? It has been plain as a pike staff that the aquifers were running towards dry for months. Don't take my word for it – the Environment Agency (EA) rainfall reports predicted as much in May.

Heavens, we had just 20% of the usual rainfall in January across the south of England. Doesn't Southern Water know that 80% of river flows are provided by the rain that falls in 25% of the year (November-February)? What exactly were they waiting for? Some sort of divine intervention? Or as many suspect, is the hosepipe ban just a bit of PR? Subtle messaging that shifts the blame from the supplier to the consumer.

You will, of course, be delighted to hear that there is a committee to deal with this "drought emergency". I'm not exactly sure something eight months in the making can be classified as an emergency and most countries in the world would consider our definition of drought as laughable but let us go with the flow.

The National Infrastructure Commission (NIC) produced a report in 2018 "Preparing for a drier future" that looked ahead to 2050, suggesting to Ofwat and the water companies (the NIC has no powers as such) that more supply infrastructure be built, leakage halved, all homes be metered and consumption per head be further reduced.

I part company with the NIC before they are out of the blocks. What is this drier future they speak of? Even the EA, who are fully signed-up climate-change boosters, model for the same rainfall in 2050 as we have now with maybe a slight change in the amount that falls in summer than winter. Or maybe it's the other way around. Nobody really knows, but, regardless, the

change will be statistically insignificant.

The simple fact is that the raw supply of water, namely rain, hasn't changed in centuries. What has is our population, the use of water and need for infrastructure that gets that water from source to tap. Much of the water grid we rely on today was planned 75 years ago when the British population was 45 million and taking a bath was regarded as a weekly event. Today, it is closer to 65 million with domestic consumption skyrocketing.

The simple fact is that the nature of the private ownership of the water supply industry is an inversion of the capitalist model on which this country is meant to run. Would any electricity company give you an unmetered supply? How many companies encourage you to use less of their product? Does Tesco allow half of every delivery to go missing between the warehouse and the store? Do you have the choice of one mobile phone provider? How many companies get their raw material for free? The last time I looked, BP had to pay hefty taxes to drill for oil. What makes water so different?

I'd like to tell you I think this "drought emergency" will be a game-changer but I doubt it. I suspect, deep in your heart, you feel the same, because this is about more than a few dry months. This is about an industry that is flawed to its core where the ownership is in the hands of investors who have little incentive, desire or compulsion to address the fundamental problems that are sucking the life out of our rivers and increasing the pollution in the water that's left. ■

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