

ANNUAL MEETING 2008

Panel members;

Chair: Tony Hales, Chairman, British Waterways
John Edmonds, Chair, Inland Waterways Advisory Council (IWAC)
Carole Souter, Chief Executive, Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF)
John Gummer, MP for Suffolk Coastal and waterways supporter
Richard Fairhurst, Editor, Waterways World

Tony Hales introduced the afternoon debate which, given the context of British Waterways' limited financial resources, focused on the future of the nation's canals and rivers. Each member of the panel spoke for approximately five minutes.

Key points made by all or most speakers were:

- we must all work together if we are to make an influential case on behalf of the waterways
- we need to widen the appeal of the waterways
- we need to be forward looking and promote the future benefits of the waterways with good research-based evidence that makes a compelling case
- we need to engage more and better with volunteers

A more detailed summary of their speeches is below:

John Edmonds, Chair, IWAC

John spoke about waterways funding - what he described as 'the only game in town' – and in particular, about a £30 million British Waterways funding gap (£50 million if an EA navigation funding gap plus "a bit of contingency funding is thrown in"). He acknowledged that profits from commercial operations will not bridge the gap and that there are competing pressures on the public purse, such as the credit crunch, fuel poverty, education and two wars. It was made clear that waterways would not be top of the public's list of priorities should Government find "£50 million a year ... down the back of some filing cabinet."

According to John, waterways supporters should find a "better and smarter way" to argue the case for funding. "Campaigning in the traditional sense might prevent further cuts in waterways but ... 60,000 or even 100,000 boaters ... won't change the minds of ministers in the Treasury."

Acknowledging that BW is “doing some of this now” he suggested that “proper research” would “establish exactly what the benefits of the waterways are.” The key, through “convincing research evidence,” is to monetise the wide ranging social, economic and environmental benefits of the waterways to society.

John suggested that the funding options should be fully explored, not just looking to national Government, but local government and any lessons from other countries or related operations.

Finally, the importance of forming alliances was stressed. He said that there is no point extolling the diverse environmental, recreational or regeneration benefits of waterways only for the user to then criticise waterside development, argue between themselves or fight the green lobby about the operation of the waterways.

“The boaters on their own cannot do it ... what we need is a good case based on well validated facts, ideas and we need to form a grand coalition of interest that goes wider than we have so far contemplated.”

Rt. Hon John Gummer, MP

John acknowledged that historically the waterways have drawn support from people, including himself, who have had a “kind of thing about the waterways.” Drawing similarities with the railways, he explained that the danger is that waterways will be seen as a niche interest that’s “not really about the future.”

“People saw the railways as a kind of sideline with certain particular interest but no real contribution to the future.” He said that once the railways were given the kind of management which actually wanted business they became oversubscribed – there was an increase in both freight and passenger numbers.

The same applies to waterways; John stated that there has to be a “change in the image of the whole waterway business.” Waterways represent more than an exercise in nostalgia or conservation; they are here and can play an important part in the way “Britain is going to face the realities that are now part of our future.”

In illustrating the role of waterways in the nation’s sustainability agenda and Government targets to bring about “cuts in emissions from 60% to 80% by the year 2050,” John gave the examples of the opportunity to use canal water [through heat exchange technology] as a more sustainable way to heat waterside businesses together with British Waterways’ announcement of proposals to develop renewable energy across its waterways.

With a flow of stories in which the waterways are central either to regeneration or to renewable energy and the battle against climate change, “there is no reason why waterways couldn’t become one of the regularly quoted examples of how you can fight climate change.”

The task, John said, includes engaging the support of waterway users, beyond “Fred Jones who has always loved narrow boats” so that members of Parliament recognise that this is not a side issue.

In answering a question from the audience, John encapsulated the theme of his speech by saying: “[British Waterways] is not a dying organisation that needs to be managed into the grave; it is a living organisation which needs to be given the opportunity of a contribution into the future.”

In the context of talking about waterway volunteering, he said “all of the boating organisations here ought to be having proper partnership agreements with other organisations who could look to the waterways to generate success for their own particular interest. If you’ve got that, great, but most of you haven’t. I don’t know why, but you haven’t. That is what I mean about inward looking.”

Richard Fairhurst, Editor, Waterways World

Richard, like the previous speakers, posed the question about how to fund the waterways – highlighting the reported £29 million shortfall which he described as “a pretty frightening number.”

Putting forward what he would referred to as a “user’s answer,” Richard focused on the benefits of volunteering – and specifically volunteering for British Waterways.

There are many instances of volunteering across the waterways, with examples beyond “shovelling mud or just about spring cleans” including running entire waterways to managing big engineering projects.

Richard’s point was that engaged volunteers, beyond just the core boating audience, could provide specific expertise that BW could harness as well as being the “eyes and ears of the waterway system.” In identifying and publicising opportunities, he suggested that tasks could go beyond physical work as “there is a lot of publicity, promotional and administrative work that volunteers can do.”

Using the example of the National Trust, 52,000 volunteers contribute 2.3 million hours each year. At the minimum wage, “assuming people are just doing unskilled work”, the point was made that would be worth “£13 million a year which is around half your [British Waterways] shortfall” – more if British Waterways was to get people to do more skilled jobs.

Carole Souter, Chief Executive, Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF)

Carole described the HLF’s role as being about more than just money. The HLF is about “bringing people together, encouraging partnership, encouraging working together.” She

said that BW may have to do more with less money, but that doesn't mean that British Waterways has to do more with less input.

Whilst having the funding is important as it makes a project happen, the HLF's experience is that "the passion, the enthusiasm, the commitment, the involvement are what actually change things for the better."

Volunteering on the waterways is taken as a matching element in the application for HLF funding, but in a slightly different message than Richard's, Carole argued that voluntary effort does not have to be channelled through British Waterways. She illustrated this with the fact that the HLF has put more than £90 million into waterways projects, with £50 million going into British Waterways and £40 million going to other people engaged and active on working around the waterways.

Carole says that one of the challenges for British Waterways is to broaden the appeal and debate about the waterways with ramblers, the RSPB and other waterway visitors "so that people don't say 'that's British Waterways' job' but say 'the waterways matter to us'."

"I think it would be a shame to focus purely on that [the funding gap] and not harness all that other access to help and support and advice from a much, much boarder society."

In answering a question, Carole stressed the importance of engaging communities. "The only way of insuring the sustainability of anything, actually, is to have people engaged in it and to have passionate advocates for it ... The way to keep things being used and valued and valuable for the future is to help people understand what is important about it and special about it and that is why I am so determined about the broader debate."