

Broads Local Access Forum

07 June 2023

Agenda item number 8

Waterways access

Report by Head of Construction, Maintenance & Ecology

Summary

Where water-based recreational activities occur outside of the marked and actively managed channels, the more natural environmental conditions of the Broads, with vegetation such as trees, shrubs, emergent wetland plants like reed and water plants on or below the surface, pose a challenge to the more adventurous navigator. However, most of the more complex wetland habitats in the Broads are protected by national legislation, being home to some of the UK's rarest and most vulnerable species. The role of the Broads Authority in facilitating water-based recreation has to be balanced and proportional to the demand, the protection and enhancement of biodiversity, and the economic well-being of the area. This report outlines some of these challenges, the constraints on management activities and the current approach taken by the Broads Authority.

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1. Introduction

- 1.1. This report should be read in conjunction with the report the Broads Authority Navigation Committee (Water plant management, agenda item 12, [Navigation Committee 8 June 2023 \(www.broads-authority.gov.uk\)](http://www.broads-authority.gov.uk)). The report to Navigation Committee covers the Authority's approach the water plant management which, for resourcing and biodiversity considerations, is exclusively in river reaches and areas of marked channels in some open broads. This report to BLAF is an opportunity for discussion of the challenges faced by waterways users and the options for facilitating

safe and enjoyable recreation outside of the main areas traditionally managed for motorboats and larger sailing vessels.

- 1.2. Increased appreciation and direct engagement with the local environment have been positive changes observed in outdoor recreation since the ease of restrictions following the COVID pandemic. The rise in the popularity and number of people actively participating in paddleboarding, canoeing/kayaking and wild swimming in the Broads has become more frequent and noticeable. Lower capital outlay, ability to take quick or flexible opportunities for such water based recreation and greater access possibilities from land are all appealing factors for many people. This is in comparison to the greater investment and time commitment required if owning or hiring motor or sailing vessels. The number of people recreating in the Broads for the first time by these more accessible means has also been reported by canoe/paddleboard hirers and the ranger team who check users for possession of the relevant navigation tolls.
- 1.3. The more mobile forms of waterways use can access greater areas of the Broads that motor or sailing vessels physically cannot. Water depth, channel width, vegetation, private landownership and riparian rights all being constraints for larger vessels, where there are navigation rights to do so. With the additional access opportunities afforded to paddled craft, the Authority guidance [Canoeing, kayaking and paddleboarding \(broads-authority.gov.uk\)](#) is that users also have a responsibility to ensure they know where they can access without trespassing and that disturbance to wildlife is avoided, especially during bird breeding season (April to July).

2. Broads Authority facilitation of waterways access

- 2.1. The location of publicly accessible slipways and launch points are promoted on the Authority's website [Slipways and launching points \(broads-authority.gov.uk\)](#) along with a zoomable map to locate these points. Last year a new canoe launching pontoon has been installed at Geldeston Lock on the River Waveney, adjacent to the Authority's 24 hour mooring.
- 2.2. As outlined in the Navigation Committee water plant management report, water plant cutting in the growing season generates sufficient under keel clearance for motor and sailing vessels, which is crucial for maintaining access along and across the navigable waterways. See the [Waterways Management Strategy & Action-Plan 2022-27 \(www.broads-authority.gov.uk\)](#), section 4.2 for the general approach taken by the Authority for water plant management. The cost and staff resource available to carrying out water plant cutting is balanced across all other waterways maintenance tasks through the year. As the staff resource is finite, increased allocation in one maintenance task means a reciprocal decrease at some point in the year for another area of waterways management.
- 2.3. The responsibility for water plant management in the zones outside the actively managed marked channels and river reaches is the topic for debate. Private boat dykes,

mooring cuts, marinas, boatyards and other adjacent waters, are outside the scope of the Authority's responsibility for navigation management. The areas of publicly accessible waterbodies, which have an active right of navigation, as per [Norfolk and Suffolk Broads Act 1988 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#), part 2, paragraph 8, are then in realm of what is deemed appropriate management, prioritised according to demand, resource availability and ecological considerations. In terms of the functions of the Authority in relation to the maintenance of the navigation area, Part II, section 10 of the 1988 Act states that:-

(1)The Authority shall—

(a) maintain the navigation area for the purposes of navigation to such standard as appears to it to be reasonably required; and

(b) take such steps to improve and develop it as it thinks fit.

2.4. Equally, Part I, section 13 of the 1988 Act also states:-

“(1) The Authority may, for the purpose of conserving the natural beauty of any area—

(a) close to navigation any area at the edge of any waterway within the navigation area; or

(b) restrict navigation in any such area to specified classes of vessel.”

The inherent conflict of multiple management objectives within the navigation area, particularly around the edges of sites, and the legislative backing to enable such decision making, requires an evidence led approach to ensure management choices are fair, transparent and take a wider view across the Broads as a whole.

3. Hickling Broad case study

3.1. Hickling Broad is an example where these access and water plant management discussions have been taking place since the initial “clear water” period in 1998-2000 with vigorous water plant growth. This ecological recovery and the impacts felt by waterways users, came after several decades of relatively unimpeded navigation over the whole broad. The evidence base for decision-making and continued ecological monitoring was subsequently developed. The Upper Thurne Working Group (UTWG) was established in January 2001 with a wide group of local and statutory stakeholders with the overall aim:

‘to develop by consensus a common vision and plan for sustainably managing the rivers and broads of the Upper Thurne, based on a sound understanding of the functioning of the hydrological and ecological catchment area, its importance for natural and cultural heritage, navigation and other forms of recreation, social and economic activities, and on the promotion of best environmental practice in its management.’

3.2. As developed and reported to the UTWG, a trial of cutting water plants within a dense stonewort bed was performed, with subsequent monitoring over three seasons. The

final report for this experiment is attached as an appendix to the report on water plant management, agenda item 12, [Navigation Committee 8 June 2023 \(www.broads-authority.gov.uk\)](http://www.broads-authority.gov.uk).

- 3.3. Over the past three years, the abundance of water plants, particularly the mixed community of stoneworts, including several nationally scarce species, has again reached particularly high growth levels. See [Broads Annual Water Plant Monitoring Report 2022.pdf \(www.broads-authority.gov.uk\)](http://www.broads-authority.gov.uk). Access for vessels outside the marked channel is difficult, if not impossible in some areas, during the peak growth season (May-October). The most recent hydroacoustic survey of Hickling Broad (May 2023) has shown that 83% of the bed of the broad is covered by water plants. This is 15% greater than the same time last year.

4. Financial implications

- 4.1. The financial implications for Broads Authority navigation budgets are outlined in the water plant management report, agenda item 12, [Navigation Committee 8 June 2023 \(www.broads-authority.gov.uk\)](http://www.broads-authority.gov.uk).
- 4.2. Locally, the waterside businesses in Hickling are reporting impacts from loss of trade and reduced offer of activities, in part due to the conditions in the broad not meeting all users expectations. The closure of the Pleasureboat Inn in 2020 coincided with the COVID pandemic and remains closed. Anecdotally, the Hickling Broad Sailing Club has had some members not renew and would-be participants in particular races not attend.

5. Risk implications

- 5.1. The risk implications for the Broads Authority operations are outlined in the water plant management report, agenda item 12, [Navigation Committee 8 June 2023 \(www.broads-authority.gov.uk\)](http://www.broads-authority.gov.uk).
- 5.2. From a public safety perspective, the risk of paddleboarders, windsurfers and canoers/kayakers getting into difficulty in areas of dense water plant growth has increased. Presence of water plants restricts movement if people are immersed in water and could also make righting vessels or getting back into vessel more of a challenge.

6. Conclusion

- 6.1. In conclusion, the aquatic environment of the Broads has undergone a recent shift in water quality and abundance of water plant growth. This is a success story in terms of the improvement in water treatment, sensitive agricultural practices in the catchment and general reduction in the negative impacts of eutrophication. Where the resultant increase in water plants has impacted on users ability to make the most of their experience of being out on the water, or to gain access to a desired location, this has caused conflict between access and conservation objectives. The Authority's response

has been to invest more time, effort and budget into managing this challenge, over the whole of the Broads area, for the benefit of as many users as possible. With the ecological recovery having been the result of multi-million pound investments from numerous stakeholders over the past few decades, the “new normal” for environmental quality and recreational users is apparent. Where the Authority can make balanced and affordable management decisions to facilitate waterways users’ access, it shall do so. This needs active involvement and engagement from all stakeholders.

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Background papers: Water plant management, agenda item 12, [Navigation Committee 8 June 2023 \(www.broads-authority.gov.uk\)](#)

[Broads Plan](#) objectives: **C3** - Manage water plants and riverside trees and scrub, and seek resources to increase operational targets