

PRESS RELEASE: Aqua, Manifestum Est ('Water, Clearly'): A Meander

The EPA's just-published report, 'Water Quality in Ireland 2013-2018', reveals that the number of "pristine" rivers has fallen from more than 500 in the 1980's to just 20 last year, further noting that over the past three decades the decreasing incidence of these aquatic gems from 13.4% to a startling 0.7% of the total rivers in Ireland.

Why has this happened and what is the appropriate response? Some key words, italicised here, leap out from Tim O'Brien's 10th December Irish Times front page coverage of the report's publication and deserve consideration: "EPA Director Matt Crowe said the *State* was not only failing to improve overall water quality but was also failing to prevent the further deterioration of rivers"; while the report asserts that "A new sense of *urgency* is now needed to address the issues of water quality..." (<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/environment/just-20-of-ireland-s-rivers-are-pristine-down-from-500-in-1980s-1.4110018>)

The "State"; well, that actually means all of us and, by extension, how we want our nation to be: regarding "Urgency"; a hierarchy of priorities is determined by political will, which is subject to a perpetual clamour from various sectors propounding competing infrastructural demands: health, education, roads, energy, policing, communications, et al. 'Water', disgracefully en route to becoming a dirty word, has been summarily disposed of by a succession of grandiose proclamations that have commissioned costly interventions including 'Water Treatment' (for both potable and sewage purposes), 'Flood Defences', 'Shannon Pipeline' and other actions all of which distinguish themselves as largely being rear guard actions to treat the symptoms rather than the root causes of a plethora of water-related problems.

Perhaps it is time to adequately fund new pilot approaches to addressing these water issues. Though there have been admirable attempts by Teagasc, Local Authorities, the EPA themselves and others to promote a change in sectoral practices to minimise anthropogenic impacts upon water quality, and new public engagement strategies piloted through the establishment of the Local Authorities Waters Programme (LAWPRO) as well as the promotion of catchment-based Rivers Trusts, these combined efforts not alone have managed to attract only a small fraction of overall water investment but as of yet, and most likely because of relatively frugal budgets, have not been able to turn a turbid tide. Yet it may be that these 'softer' solutions, supported by the science and adequate funding, might be able to make a real difference.

Along these lines, but barely on the radar, the StreamScapes Aquatic Education programme has laboured away at developing creative Community Engagement and 'Catchment Consciousness' solutions to these issues for thirty years. Among the proposals that StreamScapes has trialled is promoting the concept of 'Ultrastructure' being imposed upon the utilisation of 'Infrastructure': that is, the cultivation of awareness and mindfulness of how we impact upon the world around us through our pursuit of livelihood, recreation, and domestic management.

The StreamScapes approach views our toilets and taps, our farms and our factories, as tributaries of our local streams, encouraging participants to learn the 'best-practices' which will minimise their impacts, leading to source protection through instilling awareness, wonder, and a sense of voluntary stewardship right through rural and urban environments. To wit: it is commonly cited that the failing Ringsend sewage treatment plant was designed to cope with a population of "1.64 million people", but this presupposes a population of people unaware of how their actions limit its function. It may be time to stress the cultivation of ultrastructure/mindfulness and the good will of people who want to see the world right and to learn what they can do to contribute to this cause, and to discover the further fruit of making less demands upon a strained exchequer.

Indeed, EPA Report 155 (<https://bit.ly/2zbtqvQ>) itself posed the suggestion, "Education may be more efficacious than enforcement". The link between "pristine" waters and biodiversity is becoming clearer in the public consciousness; the links of water quality with human health and moreover economic sustainability via tourism, value of agricultural produce and multiple industries must be brought home.

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