

Initial Meet and Greet Transcript for Thurs. 18th August 2022  
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1. Welcome all and thank you for coming to this initial, informal meet and greet of the Queen Thorne Nature Watch Group. This meeting is really about offering information and allowing a space for questions and discussion ... I am not here to claim I have all of the answers - I don't... my goal here is to raise awareness and offer some potential points of action which you may, or may not like to take part in. I have prepared a presentation of the work I have done so far and there is quite a bit to get through, so I suggest that we'll go through each slide and I'll talk a bit about that and then allow time for a few questions at the end of each section and then time at the end of the presentation for more detailed Q&A and any ideas or suggestions which you may like to put forward.
  
2. The initiation of this meeting has been prompted by the sharp decline in wildlife in our valley over the last 5 or 6 years - I have personally been horrified by the cliff edge decline of certain species - particularly aquatic life, amphibians and some birds although I am also noticing a decline in small and large mammals which have always been key species of this local environment. During this time I, and some other residents of Sandford Orcas, have followed the official procedure and been repeatedly dismayed by the lack of resolution and lack of any real attempts to reverse these declines. It seems that this is part of a global problem which is not being dealt with on a global level. Local, national and global problem. I know I am not alone when I say that I find being witness to the loss disempowering and upsetting. There may be little we can do about so much of what goes on but when it comes to our home,

can we ignore it? Personally I feel I can not sit back and do nothing and am aware that we have much more chance of success if we work together, with all parts of the community, to work out what is going wrong and what we can do about it. A Nature Watch group, which is affiliated to the PC, would be able to offer research and advice to enable environmentally effective decision making - crucial in these times, not only as local policy but to send a message up the governmental chain. A group affiliated to the PC may have better funding capability in a number of ways, and being affiliated to the PC offers a kind of structure for community action.

3. With this in mind I approached the Queen Thorne Parish Council with a list of environmental/wildlife matters, some of which the QTPC had previously been made aware of. The council very generously allowed me talk at length about the matters. Many of you have seen the transcript so I won't repeat it now, but copies are available if anyone would like to read what was raised. I requested that the council consider the three following suggestions: - **Ensure that concerns about environmental impact are minuted as a record and that the omission of the previous reports is rectified by the inclusion of them in the current minutes** . I feel that is important for there to be public record of pressures on and losses of wildlife in our parish - witnessing the sudden loss has made me realise how important it is to monitor levels in order to recognise patterns and act accordingly. I would also suggest that inclusion of concerns and events in minutes is a statement of priority - omission gives the impression of little concern.....I suggested the **Instigation of a 'Nature Watch' sub-committee, the aim of which would be to protect and promote bio-diversity within the Queen Thorne parish and provide a research tool to enable more effective local decision making..... and I**

**suggested that the Parish Invest in water testing equipment to regularly and incidentally monitor water courses within the parish.**

4. Following the meeting it was pointed out to me that actually the parish council don't have the resources to instigate a Nature Watch group, so someone would have to do it. I thought I'd better see if anyone else would be interested and so began canvassing the houses in Sandford Orcas to assess whether there is a shared concern about habitat pressures and species loss. My aim was to get to every house, but as this graft shows, I've only had the chance to knock at about 50 doors and of those half were at home. Out of those two thirds of the people had concerns of varying degrees and a third were politely neutral. Main concerns mentioned included low water levels, and apparent loss of wildlife numbers with particular mention made of loss of aquatic life, reduction in amphibian numbers and loss of volume of the dawn chorus. While canvassing it became clear that the first place to start really is with the water courses, which are such a feature of this village and so essential to a healthy wildlife population. We in this parish are in an unusual situation as all of the ground water is sourced within our parish,, so we really can blame no one else and it should be within our power to improve it.
  
5. At this point I'd like to introduce the Char Valley Parish Council and their affiliated group 'Lifelines'. This picture shows a page from the Char Valley PC's website - with a brief explanation and there on the right you can see the statement of endorsement dated July 2020. I got in touch with the Char Valley PC and a meeting was arranged between Cllr Carey and myself in which we discussed the positive benefits of such a group . Cllr Carey offered extensive advice and was extremely helpful - their PC have created a template for what we could do here. Cllr Carey went on to introduce me to the founding members of the Lifeline Project and also to

active members of two River Char Community Projects and Dorset Climate Action Network -the land use team, as well as The Yeovil River's Community Trust - all excellent pro-active community groups.

Before we move away from this slide let's just note the difference in topography, the different geological features mean that their group will have differing priorities from one we begin... here, as you can see, they are choosing to focus on the insects as a start, although they do also seem to be taking part in extensive river monitoring and Cllr Carey introduced me to a three prong approach to water testing:

6. There's Neptune, with his three prongs - 'Riverfly Testing' - or 'kick testing', 'citizens science testing' and 'water guardians' - I shall go on through those one at a time, but I really only will touch the tip of the iceberg today as we don't have the time to go into too much detail - but all of these groups are worth a research - this presentation with links will be available to those who want it. I think it's worth mentioning that all of the following things just seem like really fun and inexpensive things to do!
7. Riverfly Testing, or kick testing is when groups of two or three people get together to regularly monitor the same area in order to assess and record invertebrate life, which are a good indicator of health of the water course. Results are recorded, shared and form a base line from which to monitor changes. I have spoken with Angus Menzies from this organisation and he is happy to come and visit us and offer training with no charge.
8. West Country Rivers Trust collect information from rivers in a wide area and ask communities to perform 'citizens science tests' to monitor ground water health and upload data. The tests collect simple but important details such as temperature, pH and such like. Their organisation would really like us to be uploading data from our part of the river source to add to other data, allowing an effective over view into the health of the country's water courses. I have spoken to Sam Spode of this

organisation and he would very much like to work with us to set up one or two water monitoring points... equipment and training is available by donation.

9. Water Guardians is part of the Dorset Wildlife Trust and seeks to improve habitats for wildlife and work towards clean rivers. I have been in touch with Colleen SmithMore from the DWT and she is really keen to have us on board as part of their project. They provide clear guidance and volunteer description— which is along the lines of assessing local information, present and historic, to build up and record a picture. Colleen has started setting up an online training platform. So, to summarise, these are three fun, cheap and easy community activities which provide ways of monitoring the health of streams, which can be undertaken by anyone, and are invaluable for long term recording of water course health - I endorse these projects and believe it would be beneficial for us to partake. However, as vital as this sort of monitoring is they may not work out with any great speed what is going on now... and it would seem that there is consensus that the health of our water courses has diminished rapidly over the last few years.

10. Water course pollution is a massive problem all over the country, with issues such as sewage discharge, top soil erosion, live-stock waste and agro-chemical contamination. As I previously mentioned, we are in quite an unusual situation in our home parish as all of the water courses which we have originate here - so we can only blame ourselves for such pollution - we are not importing it from anywhere else, but we are exporting our pollution downstream. Also relevant is that the water courses run through many of our gardens, so we do witness loss of biodiversity in our streams. The pattern of recorded pollution incidents over the last few years would suggest that there are some kind of regular

'events' which have led to obvious loss of aquatic life but because of the nature of the spring fed streams the pollutants are washed away. The Environment Agency appear to lack the resources or inclination to carry out any proper investigation so if we want to find out what is going on then we must be the ones to do it. Before going to the parish council I had briefly looked into water testing kits with a view to monitoring the health of the streams in the village and since then I have been asked by a member of the parish council to propose a water monitoring system which the parish council may wish to consider buying on behalf of the parish - however, this is not as straightforward as one might hope! I am now going to make a declaration of bias - I want to make it very clear that I have a massive concern about the effects of agro-chemical biocides and particularly those which contain glyphosates. I started researching the weedkiller glyphosate in 2017 following widespread application in a neighbouring field and the subsequent loss of a previously established and booming amphibian population. I am extremely concerned that these chemicals are affecting our water courses, and everything else it comes into contact with, including us. Now, some people do insist that such chemicals are safe and I would be delighted to be proved wrong... at the moment I am only seeing evidence of concern. Now, it would appear that testing for glyphosates is not straightforward, very conveniently for the manufacturer, but there may be ways around this. As our water courses originate in our parish it should not be hard to work out what is going on but we need proper monitoring equipment which can read results and not be disputed - we need equipment which we can quickly get to an event to measure problematic levels and isolate their origin and this is why I have requested that the QTPC consider investing in that equipment . I would suggest that we need a water testing device which is easy to use and mobile, records data without allowing user variabilities and tests for pre-agreed parameters. I've spent considerable time looking

at the options available and speaking to different groups and companies. Two water testing kit companies were outstanding in their information - Hannah Instruments and Xylum.

11. Shown here is the sort of set up we'd be looking at. First step would be to decide exactly it is that we want to be testing for, eg turbidity, phosphates, nitrates, ammonia, etc. It may be beneficial to get a full lab test in advance of deciding the parameters - this gets a bit complex so maybe we won't go in to that today, unless you have specific questions... basically we will be able to test for pollution resulting from agricultural run off and if that is present then preferable mitigation techniques will be identified. Dorset Wildlife Trust have been working extensively with FWAG (Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group), an advisory group run by farmers for farmers which helps to mitigate such problems when they arise and this may be an option open to us if we establish a problem. But back to the equipment- the important bit, price. For this kind of system new you will be looking at 3k+, yes a bit prohibitive.

12. However,, the people at Xylem have a semi-charitable arm to their business and I have been discussing testing at some length with David Hall from the company. He has offered us an ex-demo testing kit, with a full warranty for £600. Training for free. David has also sent me resources for community engagement... the things you can do with your kids, or grandkids for fun.

13. So, let us return to the proposal of a Queen Thorne Parish Nature Watch Group and I'll tell you what I have in mind - although of course all of my suggestions are open to discussion. I propose a group with the aim to protect and promote biodiversity within the Parish of Queen Thorne and provide a research and monitoring tool which will enable more effective environmental decision making by the QTPC and other tiers of government. This group would be made up of volunteers who have an

interest in nature and the ecology of our home. Ideally there will be sub-groups from each village who will come together to share information and resources. At this stage I do not see the need for an official council as such, I think it would be more sustainable if the group were open to all to drop in and out and by doing that I would hope that the group would be inclusive to all backgrounds and life circumstances. I would suggest that the group would need three formal members to keep it going and they would be the Chair, a treasurer and a secretary. I am happy to take on the role of chair until the group is established enough to have a vote... I would be more than happy at that point to pass over the reins. We need a treasurer who can keep track of funding applications/ donations/ outgoings and we need a secretary - this may be a voluntary or paid position, as is the clerk of the Parish Council, and preferably would be someone from the parish. Currently I am doing that work and what I can't do I am paying my PA, Laura, to do out of my own pocket- but this is not a sustainable situation long term. We may like to consider setting up the group as a charity and we have been offered support by established organisations in doing so. I would suggest that a meeting is held every other month, staggered with that of the QTPC, in order to keep the group up to date and topical (hopefully for now we will be able to use the Parish halls with no charge, as we are being allowed to today), and between those meetings fun community training events, monitoring and data collection. The group would require its own web page with news and accessible information. I would also like to suggest a 'Great Village Wildlife Survey' to gain a snapshot of where we are now with all sections of our wildlife.

14. Most importantly of all, I would say, will be the stated incorporation of the ethos of kindness into the structure of the group - to wildlife, to each other and probably most importantly to the people with whom we disagree. I know that a-lot of these topics raise high passions on both



sides but I am doing everything I possibly can to prevent divisiveness, as divisiveness is a sure way to get nothing achieved...

15.I want quickly also mention the Yeovil Rivers Community Trust - page from their website shown here. I have attended a meeting with Lorne Thompson from the Yeovil Rivers Community Trust, who has very kindly offered us support and advice particularly with regards to how to operate and set up a charity, funding advice and community engagement.

16.So, there's a lot there, and a lot we can do - does anybody have any questions, concerns or ideas at this point? And can we decide on a plan of action? I suggest a formal meeting to be held in October (does Thursday eves work or is there a better time?), and would ask anybody interested to give their name, contact details and any particular areas of interest. If anyone feels like they may like to take on the role of secretary and treasurer - at least for the initial establishment of the group please do let me know and then maybe we can arrange an agenda in advance of the October Meeting.