

Community action gathers momentum to #ReviveTheRiverOtter

A powerful wave of community action is rising in Devon, as the Otter Valley Association (OVA) teams up with local groups and Richard Foord, MP, to campaign to restore the health of the River Otter—currently rated in the bottom 20% of rivers in England for water quality by the Environment Agency (EA).

The OVA Action group ORCA (Otter River Catchment Action) is mobilizing local volunteers, anglers, civic organizations, and environmental advocates from Budleigh Salterton, Otterton, Newton Poppleford, Harpford and Ottery St. Mary to combat two major sources of pollution: Sewage-related pollution, including discharges of untreated sewage and high levels of phosphate in treated effluent from sewage works, by South West Water (SWW), and unsustainable land management.

Haylor Lass, Chairman of the Otter Valley Association, is calling on the local community to sign-up and help: *"We're a passionate civic charity and are now calling on local communities, farmers, anglers, businesses, and like-minded organisations to join forces with us to encourage SWW to take the action it needs to prevent their incessant pollution on the middle to lower reaches of the River Otter – namely to stop untreated sewage discharges and also to reduce phosphate levels in their continuous treated discharges".*

A team of 48 dedicated volunteers signed up and have been monitoring the river's health every two weeks at 12 strategic locations stretching from Honiton to the sea. Sadly, in July 2025, the Phosphate levels are averaging 4x the upper safe level for a thriving ecosystem, and peak at 6x this limit just below the main sewage treatment works. These values have been steadily increasing as the water level drops, predominantly caused by high concentrations of phosphate in **treated effluent** discharged by sewage treatment works. High levels of phosphate cause algal blooms, eutrophication, and decreased oxygen levels in the water, leading to severe consequences for plant life, wildlife and fish populations.

Further plans are in-place for River-fly (or invertebrate) testing to determine the state of life within the river and its tributaries, as well as working to reduce invasive species that are prevalent along long stretches of the river.

Local councillors, anglers, farmers, associations and businesses are behind this campaign, including:

- Richard Foord, **MP for Honiton** says "Momentum is already building to #ReviveTheRiverOtter; people-power can convince water companies to do the right thing by way of investing in our sewage treatment works here. I look forward to seeing those photos of the River Otter".
- Councillor Jess Bailey, **Devon County Council (Otter Valley)** says "have long campaigned against South West Water treating our beautiful River Otter as an open sewer. As part of this I have been pleased to help fund water testing with my DCC locality budget. The River Otter is special not only locally but nationally. It is the first river in the country to have seen the re-introduction of beavers into the wild, beavers having previously been hunted to extinction. Improving water quality is crucially important for the survival and wellbeing of the beavers and other cherished wildlife. I am excited to be part of the Revive the River Otter campaign. This is exactly what is needed, galvanising pressure on SWW and helping restore the River Otter to its former glory.
- Sam Bridgewater, **Director of Environment Strategy and Evidence, Clinton Devon Estates** says: "This is a brilliant initiative. Community-led and bringing together a broad alliance of the willing, it addresses an issue of great concern for wildlife and for society. Clinton Devon Estates is delighted to be involved."
- Howard Furnival, of **Tracey Farm**, says "We would be keen to be involved with this project with the OVA and their campaign ORCA. As a family who have lived for 7 generations, we are saddened to see how the river has been abused and mistreated. We hope this project will be the catalyst for change".
- Martin Davies, **Secretary of the Ottery Fly Fishing Club** says "Anglers spend a lot of time on rivers and develop a close affinity with them and all the wildlife there. To witness, first-hand, the river Otter being degraded so badly is both shocking and depressing"
- Bruce McGlasham, **Secretary of the River Otter Fisheries Association** says "We are delighted to be working with OVA and the ORCA campaign to improve the quality of the river Otter. This will benefit not only local habitats and the natural environment for all, but also fish and all the other life that lives within or by the river"
- Councillor Ian Simpson, **Otterton Parish Council**, says " Having grown up in the local area and lived in Otterton for 25 years, local residents and I find it extremely saddening to see the present state of the river Otter. As a child I fished and swam in this river and as an adult some 20 years ago me and my

family along with many locals swam and used the river for recreation. The decline has been dramatic and devastating. Dogs that paddle in the river, including my own have become ill with vomiting and stomach issues. People swimming have become ill to the point that we warn people how polluted it is. Fish stocks have dwindled, and some species almost disappeared. I welcome the efforts of the OVA, and its ORCA campaign, to hopefully change the downward path of this once beautiful river and I feel that those polluting it should hang their heads in shame."

- Councillor Dean Stewart, **Chair of the Community Infrastructure Committee of Ottery St Mary Town Council**, says "Ottery St Mary Town Council have been concerned for many years about the condition of the River Otter and other local waterways and beaches. We have questioned SWW in detail and both financially and politically supported local community groups such as the Tale Valley Trust and Tipton Eager Beavers. We very much welcome the formation of the ORCA campaign by the Otter Valley Association, and we hope we will be able to meet with them, support them and amplify their campaign for lasting and significant change."
- Councillor Susan P Tribble, **Chairman Newton Poppleford & Harford Parish Council**, says Newton Poppleford and Harford Parish Council are concerned that poor water quality in the River Otter is impacting parishioners in multiple ways. These include reduced access to the river, diminished recreational and amenity value, and broader concerns over public health and environmental quality.
- **Budleigh Salterton Town Council** says that "it remains deeply concerned about the continued decline in the quality of water in the locality. The Council has been working closely with the Environment Agency, East Devon District Council, South West Water, and the Otter Valley Association (OVA) in an effort to address this issue. As a result of these collaborative efforts, the Environment Agency has confirmed that it will double its water testing along Budleigh Salterton's Blue Flag-awarded beach throughout 2025. Budleigh Salterton is the only town situated within the East Devon National Landscape, and it forms part of the Jurassic Coast, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The town's natural environment – including its coastline, the River Otter and its resident beaver population, and the award-winning Lower Otter Estuary – is a significant attraction for visitors and a vital part of the local economy. Maintaining the ecological health of these areas is therefore of paramount importance. Regular water testing, carried out both by the ORCA arm of the OVA and by the Environment Agency, plays a crucial role in providing transparent and independent data. This evidence is essential in maintaining pressure on South West Water to review and revise its current practices, and to prioritise the restoration of the River Otter's water quality. Budleigh Salterton Town Council will continue to advocate for the protection and enhancement of the town's unique natural assets on behalf of its residents and future generations".
- Iorwerth (Yog) Watkins, **Westcountry Rivers Trust**, says "I've been working on the Otter for many years and have seen significant improvements in farm management on many farms, but there is still more that needs to be done. SWW have contributed to my work through the Upstream Thinking project (UST), helping farmers use their nutrients more efficiently and avoid losses to both the River Otter and the aquifer. Unnoticed by many, there is also the contribution from private septic tanks that haven't been maintained properly."
- Geoff Jung, **East Devon District Council**, says "The river water quality of the River Otter is in a shameful decline. We all need to work together from residents, farmers, landowners, fertiliser and chemical companies, highways and sewage infrastructure providers, councils, government bodies and volunteers to all combine our knowledge, and best practices to return this river to its rightful place as an amazing river teeming with wildlife. This is a wonderful positive step in the right direction!

How to Get Involved

The OVA invites everyone to join in. Whether through volunteering, sharing resources, or amplifying the message, there's a role for all who care about clean water, thriving wildlife, and resilient communities. To join the campaign or simply understand what is going on, please join the ORCA Facebook group at:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/otterrivercatchmentaction/> and share your experiences. Please also use the hashtag **#ReviveTheRiverOtter** when sharing on social media.

For press inquiries, interview requests, or to learn how to participate, please contact the Otter Valley Association, or the ORCA campaign team via:

- Email: ORCA@ova.org.uk
- Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/otterrivercatchmentaction/>
- Web: <https://www.ova.org.uk/nat-environ/otter-river-catchment-action-orca>

Images for use by editors:

Two images are provided with this release – the first showing a section of the Otter River near its very top with clean sparkling gravel. The second shows a picture of the lower Otter with a thick layer of slimy algae covering, what should be, clean sparkling gravel. Gravel that should be teeming with insect life - not smothered.



Image 1: Clean Upper Otter



Image 2: Polluted Lower Otter