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New charity will protect freshwater wildlife

The Freshwater Habitats Trust is launched today, 12 September 2013, to counter 'all pervasive' threats to life in freshwater

A new charity – the **Freshwater Habitats Trust** is launched today to spearhead the fight against biodiversity loss in Britain's freshwaters.

The **Freshwater Habitats Trust** will build on 25 years work as Pond Conservation, to bring a new approach to protecting our streams, ponds, ditches, rivers and lakes. The new Trust will place particular emphasis on creating areas of clean water, something that has now almost vanished from large parts of the landscape and which is vital for our wildlife.

The extent of damage to freshwaters – especially from pollution - is quite astonishing, and hasn't been helped by misleading official statements that 'rivers are at their cleanest for over a century'¹. Our research shows that in typical English countryside – with a mixture of farms, villages and small towns – 95% of streams, ponds, rivers and lakes have pollution levels which damage their biology.

Bringing together the information on all freshwaters, which has not been done before:

- There are barely a handful of undamaged **rivers** left in England; even in remote parts of Scotland fewer than 1 in 10 rivers is undamaged
- **Lakes:** just one lake in England and Wales is classed as undamaged biologically.
- 87% of **headwater streams** east of the line from the Humber to the Dorset coast are biologically degraded
- **Ponds:** 92% are biologically degraded
- 95% of **canals** have impacted water quality.

What is clean water? Clean water has a chemistry that would be normal for its area in the absence of significant human pollution impacts. It is sometimes called 'the natural background', 'minimally impaired water quality' or 'the reference condition'. In terms of legislation it is water categorised as 'High' on the five point Water Framework Directive water quality classification of High, Good, Moderate, Poor and Bad.

Pollution is so pervasive that many people have never seen a clean and healthy pond or stream. They don't realize the richness and beauty of these habitats. Freshwaters have become muddy polluted places to avoid, rather than habitats where you want to take your shoes off and paddle, and where children can safely splash and play.

¹ On September 22nd 2009 Dr Paul Leinster, Chief Executive of the Environment Agency, said: "Our rivers are at their cleanest for over a century, which is why we are seeing the return of otters, eels and salmon to the Thames, Mersey and Tyne. "In fact, salmon are nationally at more or less their lowest level in history, as well as being extinct in the Thames (where their reintroduction failed); eels are also down nationally, and in the Thames specifically by c95%. Apart from otters – which have recovered - this highly selective statement was not true in a number of ways. NOTE – This statement has been deleted from the Environment Agency website but is still available in Google Cache.

Freshwater life is suffering too and many iconic species are now at all-time low: salmon, native crayfish, eels, water voles and 100s of other less well-known plants and animals: the amazing ancient Tadpole Shrimp, the delicate pillwort fern whose minute fronds uncurl to create lush green underwater lawns, the Southern Damselfly, the Pearl Mussel: all are found in so few places that a chance pollution event, an unexpected flood or simply a year or two of bad weather could lead to their complete extinction in this country.

To counter these threats the **Freshwater Habitats Trust** will take a new approach, focusing particularly on smaller waters, usually the most important for biodiversity. The Trust will use novel methods – for example, using clean water pond creation in its Million Ponds Project to increase the area of unpolluted freshwater, and working from the top of stream catchments downstream to clean them up – something which, surprisingly, existing projects don't automatically do.

And we won't waste money on solutions which aren't proven: like putting back bends in large rivers which have been straightened for land drainage.

We'll also be starting monitoring programmes that cover **all** waters, big and small. At present, official monitoring programmes are highly selective – focusing almost entirely on big and obvious waters. This means that the smaller waters where most wildlife lives go largely unmonitored and, as result, barely, if at all, protected.

Jeremy Biggs – who directs the new organization – said: 'People have long assumed that most life is found in the biggest waters. But research over the last 20 years has shown that surprisingly a wider variety of plants and animals live in the smallest waters – ponds, headwaters streams, even man-made ditches where these are unpolluted – than in bigger lakes and rivers.

Chairman of the Freshwater Habitats Trust, Martin Layer said: "Freshwater is just about the most threatened part of the natural world – our experience as Pond Conservation has shown that we can make a difference by combining outstanding technical knowledge with real practical action. Now we want to extend that approach to all of freshwater."

The new charity builds on 25 years of experience as 'Pond Conservation'.

Notes to editors:

1. **Locations** are available to show impacts of pollution throughout the landscape – focusing on the way in which even the smallest headwater streams and ponds are damaged by pollution.

2. Amongst the work we will be doing to explain to the problem to people is setting up a **national pollution monitoring programme** which covers all kinds of freshwater – big and small. This will be the first programme ever to consider all kinds of freshwater. We've got a simple and reliable visual chemical water test which shows how apparently crystal clean water is in fact **highly contaminated**.

3. We've also got some good **locations to show biological impacts of pollution** – including classic examples of pollution from apparently satisfactory effluent treatment plants affecting headwater streams.

4. The Freshwater Habitats Trust will be concerned with protecting the biodiversity of our freshwaters. It comes into existence on 12th September 2013. The organisation's new public **strategy** is available for advance viewing.

5. The **detailed statistics** will be presented at the International Association for Landscape Ecology (IALE) by Dr Jeremy Biggs on the day before the launch of the new Freshwater Habitats Trust on September 11th.