

# Alex Inman: “Practical Implementation of the Ecosystem Approach: The Westcountry Rivers Trust”

## Abstract

The Westcountry Rivers Trust is an environmental charitable Trust based in South West England. Over the past 10 years, the Trust has implemented a series of catchment scale projects, ostensibly designed to protect water resources from diffuse agricultural pollution. These projects have involved a two stage methodology: a systematic approach to identifying environmental impacts at a river catchment scale, followed by a practical *modus operandi* for tackling these impacts involving the mobilisation of farmers and land managers to implement solutions 'on the ground'. Importantly, the link between environmental improvements and economic profitability is promoted heavily to facilitate uptake of new ideas and approaches.

Having identified specific sub-catchments or target areas in which to work, Westcountry Rivers Trust personnel contact farmers and land managers to raise awareness of the problems identified at the planning stage and seek practical solutions to these problems at an individual site or farm scale. Two main tools are used to achieve these outcomes: proactive farm visits and the production of whole farm plans.

In order to engage landowners effectively, it is necessary to proactively 'cold-call' individuals in target areas to initiate dialogue. Westcountry Rivers Trust field advisers spend a considerable proportion of their time proactively approaching landowners, progressively contacting as many individuals as possible within a specific catchment or sub-catchment. Intimate knowledge of specific geographic areas and communities is developed over time which provides advisers with credibility when approaching 'new' farmers for the first time.

Free field visits are offered to landowners with the objectives of jointly reviewing on-site land use and potential for environmental and economic improvements. Site specific management plans are then developed, integrating advice on best management practices with an appraisal of options to improve land use, reduce costs, improve returns and meet specific conservation needs.

A key feature of the Westcountry Rivers Trust approach is the demonstration of economic savings and gains to farmers, for example through efficient management of fertilisers. A considerable number of farms involved in the Trust's projects have derived financial benefits from reducing in-organic fertiliser usage, the savings coming from careful targeting, timing and application of bag fertiliser and making good use of the nutrients contained within manures. Coupled with the use of clover in suitable grass leys and focused cropping, grazing and cutting regimes, benefits accrue to both farm profitability and the environment.

To date, the Trust has developed 130 'Best Farming Practice' guidance notes, which are distributed to landowners and land managers in conjunction with whole

farm plans. These guidance notes provide practical information on a whole host of environmental management concerns, and stress the link between economic benefit and improved environmental husbandry where ever possible. Importantly, they are presented in a user-friendly format, accessible to both technical and non-technical readers.

Some key learning points to come out of the Trust's projects so far are:

- Individuals need to be enfranchised and empowered to take action on the ground
- Environmental protection should be sold as a cost saving to society not a cost
- A public debate is urgently required to reach consensus on who should pay for enhanced environmental improvements (we need to put some values on environmental externalities)
- Building Social Capital and Trust between stakeholders is absolutely vital
- An independent third party can help bring people together
- Natural and Social Scientists must join forces
- We should be wary about introducing new institutions to manage ecosystems and should think about how we make better use of existing ones

### **Curriculum Vitae**

Alex Inman is Director of Policy at the Westcountry Rivers Trust with an academic and professional background in environmental policy analysis and applied social and market research. Having for many years been in the business of designing and implementing both quantitative and qualitative public opinion and attitude surveys, Alex now spends much of his time developing public participation strategies, specifically within the context of integrated catchment management. Current consultancy projects involve piloting a participatory system of farmer self-help groups to tackle diffuse pollution on behalf of the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs, the design of an abstraction management public participation strategy for a regional UK Water Company and the facilitation of catchment stakeholder groups in an EU Habitats Directive designated site on behalf of the Environment Agency.

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