



## **ANGLERS EMBRACE THE BIG SOCIETY! 3<sup>rd</sup> RIVERFLY CONFERENCE DEMONSTRATES HOW RIVER SCIENTISTS CARVE A BRIGHT FUTURE FOR UK RIVERS**

**Lord (Chris) Smith, Environment Agency Chairman, champions rivers Big Society working in partnership with the angling community. Riverfly Partnership's Anglers' Monitoring Initiative (AMI) given as prime example**

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Riverfly Conference, held on Thursday March 10<sup>th</sup> at the Natural History Museum, organised by the Riverfly Partnership - a network of 100 partners - and hosted by the Salmon & Trout Association on behalf of the Partners, attracted a "full house" audience drawn from all quarters of UK fishery and aquatic environment interests, in the 200-seater Flett Theatre. The conference, Your Rivers – Their Future, united for the first time citizen scientists (anglers and community groups), regulators, regulated organisations and academic interests on an equal platform. Lord Smith opened a programme that featured speakers ranging from the volunteers and statutory body representatives who make such projects as AMI the success it is, academia (Prof Steve Ormerod, University of Wales) to industry (Richard Aylard of Thames Water) to scientist anglers (Dr. Cyril Bennett, John Spedan Lewis Trust).

In his opening remarks, Lord Smith declared, "It is impossible for a statutory body to replicate the work of River Trusts, the valuable work of AMI and the Riverfly Partnership."

The conference celebrated the progress of the AMI (launched at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Conference four years ago) which now has more than 50 'Big Society' volunteer groups regularly monitoring riverflies, the pollution-sensitive canaries of our rivers, at more than 380 river sites across the UK.

The morning session was largely devoted to AMI, with groups from Wales (led by Dai Roberts, of the SE Wales Monitoring Group), suburban London (Will Tall, of Wandle Piscators) and Northern Ireland (Ballinderry River Enhancement Association) describing triumphs – successful cases against polluters in Wales – tragedies – the devastating bleach pollution in the Wandle – and challenges – maintaining a pristine environment in a rural location in Northern Ireland. Stuart Croft, a long-time member of the S&TA Yorkshire branch, asked the question “Where does the volunteer come from?” with a case history of how his volunteer group, led by the late Gerald Stocks, turned the Don from a dead river to a living one – the Big Society in action!

Water companies do not enjoy a universally good press, but Richard Aylard gave a cogent account of Thames Water’s anti-pollution programme while Prof Steve Ormerod threw down the gauntlet with a challenge to the AMI programme to “think big” in the Big Society, instancing the work of the British Trust for Ornithology as a template for engaging all sections of society, especially children. And Geoff Bateman, EA Head of River Basin Management, concluding the morning, took up the cry with a heartfelt, “UK society **needs** to think of the water environment,” and went on to explain the critical role the Water Framework will play in protecting and improving our rivers.

Conservation and Management considerations occupied the afternoon session, which ranged from the problems outlined by Craig Macadam, of the RP Species and Habitat Group, in conserving riverfly diversity, to the challenges and possibility of correct restoration of rivers and waterways, detailed by Dr. Judy England of the River Restoration Centre; from the potential disaster that a killer shrimp on the loose could create, as described by Dr. Mark Diamond, the EA’s Ecology & Biodiversity Manager, to the potential revitalisation of an endangered riverfly, the blue winged olive, that Dr. Cyril Bennet is working on.

There followed a lively discussion period, ably chaired by freelance journalist, Tom Fort, where most of the day’s issues were debated, particularly the protocols surrounding the invasion of alien species such as the killer shrimp, and the pros and cons of attempts to restore locally extinct flylife, as proposed by Cyril Bennett. Although some scientific caution was expressed over such programmes, there was much support for Cyril’s calls for practical action now to try and save our aquatic flylife, before some species became just a memory.

Paul Knight, Chairman of the Riverfly Partnership and CEO of the Salmon & Trout Association, which hosts the Riverfly Partnership, concluded, “The Conference demonstrated conclusively what a power for good these organisations, and the volunteers who work for them, are, and it must be the prime object of everyone attending to ensure that this is developed even further to safeguard our waterways for future generations.”