



Upstream with the Ashreigney & Riddlecombe Nature Recovery Group

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I WAS PRIVILEGED to grow up in the New Forest and spent many wonderful summer days playing in the woodland streams, discovering what lived beneath up-turned stones, finding Bullheads in old, discarded bottles, watching Brook Lamprey wriggle among the gravel and catching small trout.

I started fly fishing quite late on in life and, living only a short distance from our beautiful River Taw, I set about getting to know each pool and riffle on the Taw Fishing Club's stretch of the river. So, when I was asked by the late Duncan Mackie, the then Chairman of the Club, whether I would consider taking on the role of river warden, I accepted the challenge enthusiastically. I enjoyed every aspect of my new role and discovered that the river is a great teacher - reminding us all that we are not separate from nature and that the task of caring for our rivers brings together hand, heart and mind requiring practical skills to help restore habitats, harnessing the passion of anglers and others, working with partners and practicing new forms of leadership.

In 2022 a new challenge appeared on the horizon when Mike Moser from The North Devon Biosphere asked me whether I would consider creating a new community group to help support the Biosphere's objectives at a Parish level. This was a considerable leap of faith. My Parish of Ashreigney & Riddlecombe has a very small population of less than three hundred souls. I had no way of predicting whether anyone would be interested. Much to my surprise and great delight, an augural meeting resulted in the formation of a scratch Committee and within a few short weeks we had a

bank account open and a working draft of our aims and objectives. The Ashreigney & Riddlecombe Nature Recovery Group was up and running!

The next step was to organise a bigger community meeting to clarify our shared passion and priorities for nature recovery in the Parish. Nearly forty people turned up to this inspiring gathering and before long we had a supporters' data base, an outline of our aims and objectives and an emerging programme of awareness-raising and practical nature recovery activities underway.



This gathering provided an important opportunity to bring new people on to the Committee. What was remarkable was the number of people from the Parish who came forward to join the Committee - all of them bringing extensive knowledge and enthusiasm for nature recovery. The creation, facilitating and sustaining of our energetic Committee has proved to be the foundation of the progress we have made.

The extended Committee enabled the Group to start articulating the aim of our nature recovery journey - creating and restoring wildlife-rich habitats in our fields, in our woods, in our hedgerows, on our moorland and in our waterways. The Committee also started thinking strategically about the nature recovery process needed in our Parish. This resulted in approaching our nature recovery work by focussing on three cornerstone habitats:

1. The remaining scattered fragments of our ancient woodland
2. The extensive areas of species-rich Culm Grassland
3. The network of water ways running through the Parish – of which The Mully Brook is our principal waterway.

Our activities have been funded by numerous small grants and a larger grant from Southwest Water which has helped us with our work on The

Mully Brook and wetland areas. We have also benefitted from The National Lottery Climate Action Fund – Nature and Climate through a four-year programme managed by The North Devon Biosphere. This means we have a part-time support worker who has made a real impact on our work and continuity.

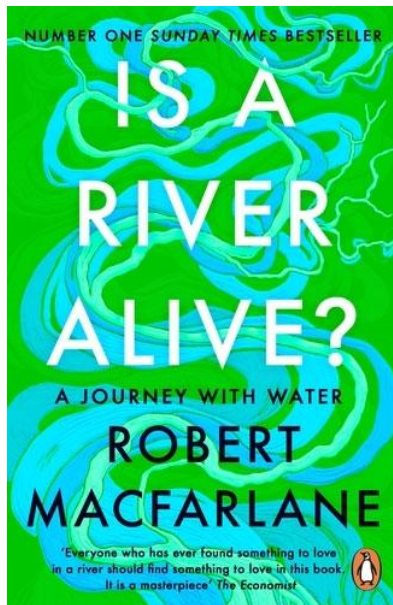
Our waterway activities have, from the beginning, included regular water quality monitoring. We have also been carefully monitoring a large-scale conifer forestry clearance contract that is ongoing in the Parish with particular attention to monitoring the impact on the water course.

Like virtually all waterways, the Mully Brook is affected by sewage pollution, and we have been proactive in engaging with our District and County Councillors about the pollution in the Brook coming out of the old Southwest Water treatment works.

Last year, we arranged for the Wild Trout Trust to carry out a survey of the Mully Brook at Lea Moor to explore the potential for conservation and enhancement. The Mully Brook is 9.6km long and drains into The Taw below Colleton Bridge. The Brook is an important part of the Taw and North Devon Streams catchment area - receiving water from an area of about 26km². The survey confirmed that the Brook is diverse with excellent natural meanders, pools, riffles and glides including some high-quality habitat features.

Adjacent to the Brook at Lea Moor is a high-quality species-rich Culm Grassland moor that will be integrated into a new regenerative agroforestry project. Working closely with the farmer, we have started work on a range of habitat improvement activities on the Brook. Guided by The Wild Trout Trust report and its recommendations, our aim is to bring the Mully Brook into good ecological condition by the end of 2027 as well as realising the potential of integrating the Brook into the new regenerative agroforestry project.

This winter we started improving the riparian zone by enlarging the buffer area, removing, and replacing an old stock fence with a new fence 10meters further back, clearing scrub and planting two hundred trees, creating a more favourable environment for insects to complete their lifecycle and an improved ecological corridor providing natural food resources for fish.



Despite the continuing pollution of our rivers and the likely extinction of the Atlantic Salmon, I think we might be witnessing a turning point.

[The River Rights Movement](#) is gathering momentum and the many local campaigns demanding the protection of our rivers are very good reasons to be optimistic about the future.

As Robert Macfarlane says in his book *IS A RIVER ALIVE?* *"Rivers are easily wounded but given a chance they heal themselves with remarkable speed. Their life pours back."*

Neil Spencer

Spring/Summer 2026



[Ashreigney & Riddlecombe Nature Recovery Group](#)