

Slum Boats - The EA Responds

Sunbury Matters put in a request for information relating to the responsibility of clearing slum boats along the Thames, both abandoned and residential vessels. "The Environment Agency is aware of the issues associated with a number of boats in the lower Thames and want to reassure residents that we are doing all we can to tackle them with the powers and resources available to us."

It seems that the River Thames Waterways Operations team is responsible for the navigation service which supports boating on the Thames. They are leading a co-ordinated, multi-agency response to the problem and have already diverted considerable resources to help deal with the situation and support local authorities and the police in their own enforcement efforts. The work is ongoing, and will remain so for as long as necessary. All agencies must follow due legal process of course, and this can be a lengthy process. So the effects of this work may not produce immediately visible results. One element of this work is the 'zero tolerance' approach the EA have adopted on their own land and mooring facilities along the lower Thames. They will take appropriate enforcement action against any boat owners who breach the terms and conditions of designated EA mooring sites, or who moor without consent on other areas of land owned by the EA.

But the problem we face along the Thames is who actually owns the land which many boats used for residential use - the 'slum boat' villages included. Action against owners of boats moored elsewhere can only be taken by the registered owner of that land, or, if it is a designated mooring site, the operator of that facility. The law does not allow the EA to intervene in such cases, beyond providing advice and guidance to landowners and mooring site operators on how to manage the issue themselves, should they choose to do so. So we all have to complain to individual land owners, who it seems own much of the land and mooring facilities along the lower Thames. But who are they and how can we find out. I asked the question and am awaiting a response.

If you happen to be one of the landowners affected by this issue you can call the EA on 03708 506 506 or email enquiries@environment-agency.gov.uk. If you live opposite a boat slum, we are no closer to finding out who to speak to though!

On the issue of sunken boats the EA tell us responsibility lies with the owners to remove them. They



Officers carrying out enforcement action in the area

are *legally* obliged to do this. But the problem is often identifying both boat and owner. If the owner can be identified, the EA will serve an enforcement notice to compel them to remove the boat. If they do not, the agency will remove or destroy it themselves and seek to recover the costs of this operation. But it can be a lengthy process as protocols have to be followed. Costs are not always recovered either and with an ever dwindling budget there is a limit to how far the EA will go.

The EA is also working in partnership with local authorities and other landowners, as they are responsible for removing any boats from their land if the owner cannot be traced. Using their legal powers as the navigation authority for the non-tidal Thames they are accelerating the process by which landowners can take possession of abandoned boats. The EA can then carry out joint operations to remove or destroy them.

The EA summarises "This is a very complex situation, and it can only be managed through patient, systematic, co-ordinated management by all the agencies, corporations and individuals with appropriate powers to act. Residents can be assured that this is happening and delivering results, but the pace is often governed by legal processes and these cannot be circumvented without putting the outcomes which we all want, at risk."

But what of policing the river itself? Surely that lies with the EA. If boats are being regularly stolen, stripped and abandoned surely it is down to the EA to do something about this. The instances are becoming all too frequent on our stretch of river at the moment. BEWARE!!

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