

Environmental issues affecting Welsh waters – Denbigh and District Probus Group

Members of the Denbigh and District Probus Club enjoyed their May meeting with a wonderful meal at Tweedmill, St Asaph, followed by a talk titled **Environmental issues affecting Welsh waters** from Professor John Solbé DSc., M.B.E. FRSB. FIFM.

John Solbé is a retired biologist. He graduated in 1963 and joined the Water Pollution Research Laboratory (DSIR) to study many aspects of environmental protection, later becoming Principal Biologist and managing the ecotoxicology information service. He represented the management of the (by then) Water Research Centre.

In 1988 he joined Unilever to manage ecotoxicological research at Port Sunlight and in 1995 moved his staff to a purpose-built site nearby with its own external facilities supported by extensive laboratories.

He 'retired' in 2001 to become a consultant to industry and government for the next 13 years. He is a Steward of St Asaph Cathedral and was Head Steward for over 12 years. He and his wife Rosie, another Cardiff biologist have been a driving force in the RSPB Conwy's Green Team, seeking to improve the efficient uses of electricity and water and the recycling of wastes. They received the RSPB President's Award in 2010. John was awarded the DSc in 1992 by the CNAA and the MBE in 1995 'for services to environmental safety'. They are both Liverymen of the Worshipful Livery Company of Wales.

John delivered his talk on specific areas all relevant to Wales but linked to the bigger picture issues such as polluted estuaries, acid rain, acid mine drainage, forestry and water resources, heavy metals pollution, oestrogen mimics from textile chemicals, animal husbandry causing water problems, eutrophication from farming and low river flows which enhance problems from sewage effluents.

He categorised the problems for the Welsh environment under the headings agriculture, industrial, coal-gas production, urbanisation and centralised food processing and their impact in the air, on land and in water and went into many of the details and discussed ongoing and potential solutions.

The impact on the residual environments and land conditions was illustrated by the historic extraction of copper ore at Mynydd Parys on Anglesey where the very acidic land that remains can't sustain much apart from heather and there was similar mining activity on the Great Orme in Llandudno.

In terms of forestry, pine trees are an atmospheric scrubber, bringing down acid to water.

John also discussed the sources of problems for the Atlantic salmon. He described the lifecycle of salmon, their breeding cycle and their movement through the river systems and the threats to them including heavy industry pollution particularly in estuaries, over fishing, soil erosion leading to siltation, sediment banks and a concentration of prey and strong organic wastes leading to oxygen depletion. He also explained how the loss of access to spawning and nursery habitats can have a huge impact on the salmon population.

The organisms in water can help you to determine what is the general health of a river and are a really useful indicator of pollution.

There have been a number of interventions to overcome the problems which have had various levels of success including bag limits and catch and return for anglers and fishermen, construction of fish passes, refuges, and European directives and guidelines such as the urban wastewater treatment directive and forests and water guidelines, but there are other solutions yet to be activated to help to make a difference.

There are also still more problems that will need addressing like genetics, storm-sewage, epidemics, long-range effects, climate change and mysteries!!

Club members thoroughly enjoyed the presentation and were pleased to be given access to more research information via <https://independent.academia.edu/JohnSolbe>

The next Denbigh and District Probus Club meeting will be on Monday 1st June 2026 at Tweedmill in St Asaph, when the speaker will be Peter Kirkpatrick who will talk about the work of The Samaritans.

Denbigh and District Probus Club is a group of business or professional women and men either approaching or enjoying retirement or semi-retirement.

New members are always warmly welcomed to the Denbigh and District Probus Club meetings.

For further information, have a look at the club website denbighprobus.com or contact stevetootell@gmail.com

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