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Choked... by your breakfast eggs: Conservationists claim that Britain's hunger for free-range eggs has turned one of the country's loveliest rivers into a putrid, algae-ridden swamp

By [GUY ADAMS FOR THE DAILY MAIL](#)

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The River Wye at Tintern Abbey was Britain's first beauty spot to be acclaimed, with the great and good of Georgian society flocking to a place where William Wordsworth waxed lyrical about 'These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs, With a soft inland murmur'.

Today, the 250-year-old tourist attraction still draws tens of thousands of walkers, canoeists, and sightseers each summer.

Most tour the Wye Valley, an area of outstanding natural beauty which has in recent times provided scenic filming locations for many movies as well as the modish TV programme Sex Education.



The putrid spectacle is known as an 'algal bloom'. This tends to erupt during periods of dry weather and bright sunshine. It prevents light from reaching aquatic plants, which wither and die, and reduces oxygen levels so the river becomes toxic for fish

Yet if modern sightseers expect to encounter Wordsworth's 'sylvan Wye', or take in local views that were dubbed a 'Godly scene' by his chum Samuel Taylor Coleridge, they may end up disappointed.

Why so? Well, recent summers have seen the usually gin-clear river filled with thick green algae for weeks and sometimes months on end.

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I encountered one such 'bloom' earlier this month when I walked along a stretch of the river near Redbrook, a couple of miles from my home in Monmouthshire.

The water, in which you can usually see shoals of minnow and the occasional trout, resembled pea soup. Gravel beds were covered with a thick, slimy gunk. The air smelled salty and unpleasant, like a seaside harbour at low tide.

This distressing spectacle continued for mile after meandering mile. And this week, I discovered what may very well have been to blame.



- **Most tour the Wye Valley, an area of outstanding natural beauty which has in recent times provided scenic filming locations for many movies as well as the modish TV programme Sex Education. The Wye Valley is pictured above before the 'algal bloom'**

A startling report from a conservation body called the Wye & Usk Foundation [WUF] claims that the ‘ecological disaster’ of algal blooms facing ‘Britain’s favourite river’ is an unexpected by-product of our growing appetite for free-range eggs.

The foundation says that recent years have seen a dramatic expansion of chicken farming in rural Powys, where the headwaters of the Wye and its tributaries can be found.

This, it contends, is responsible for high levels of phosphates entering the river and fuelling the blooms.

All of which highlights an awkward fact: that while we may like to kid ourselves that expensive free-range eggs are laid by small flocks which roam grassy fields, the reality is that almost all those we buy come from vast Intensive Poultry Units (IPUs).

These huge egg factories, which in Powys contain up to 64,000 birds each, consist of a large warehouse-like barn where the chickens roost at night and lay eggs by day, and an outdoor ‘range’ where they roam en masse.

After being taken to an IPU, each bird lays just over 300 eggs in roughly an 18-month period. Then the entire flock is slaughtered and replaced.

Crucially, the IPUs which now dot much of the landscape in Powys, from where a hefty portion of the nation’s eggs now come, also happen to produce unbelievable quantities of chicken manure.

In fact, for every thousand chickens on a particular site, you’ll around get half a ton of the stuff every month.

A 64,000-bird IPU will therefore churn out upwards of 300 tons a year. Crucially, chicken poo is rich in phosphorous and nitrates, and a good portion of it will find its way into local streams and rivers.

Pictures on the WUF’s website to this end show rivers of effluent washing into streams from farmland.

‘Chickens make two things: eggs and excrement,’ is how Simon Evans, the Foundation’s CEO puts it.

‘With free-range birds, some of the excrement goes straight from the chicken onto the land. The rest they produce in barns, where it is then usually collected up and spread on the surrounding fields as a form of fertiliser.

‘When there are only a few farms, that’s totally fine. But the number of farms in Powys has just exploded.

‘There are now 109 chicken units around the headwaters of the Wye. There were just three in 2009. You cannot load up a catchment area with this much phosphate and not expect it to have an effect. It will kill your river.’

The sheer scale of poultry farming in this large but thinly populated Welsh county certainly beggars belief.

According to the Campaign for the Protection of Rural Wales [CPRW], 137 planning applications for IPUs were approved by the county council in the past five years, and four last month. A further 23 are in the pipeline, for units that will each hold between 12,000 and 150,000 birds.

Since 2001, the total capacity of IPUs in Powys has grown from 128,000 to a staggering 9,921,499 hens, and has doubled in the past five years. There are now 76 chickens for every person that lives there.

Not all of the birds are laying free-range eggs, of course. In fact, many of the larger IPUs contain so-called ‘broiler’ hens which are slaughtered for meat at roughly 40 days old and taken to Hereford for processing. But they all eat food, and produce manure, in unprecedented volumes.



• **A startling report from a conservation body called the Wye & Usk Foundation [WUF] claims that the ‘ecological disaster’ of algal blooms facing ‘Britain’s favourite river’ is an unexpected by-product of our growing appetite for free-range eggs [File photo]**

‘The sheer numbers of chickens just don’t add up if you want to keep rivers clean,’ says Evans.

‘Take the River Ithon, which is a tributary of the Wye, upstream of Llanbister. It’s a beautiful place, a special area for conservation, and although fewer than a hundred people live there, you’ve now got 20 chicken sheds. It’s a crime.’

The Wye isn’t the only river in the firing line: Powys also contains catchment areas for the Severn and Usk, two of Britain’s other great rivers, along with the Towy, once a renowned sea trout river.

Spreading excess manure on grassland anywhere in the UK is perfectly legal, provided farmers follow specific guidelines.

However, Christine Hugh-Jones, local secretary of the CPRW, points out that ‘in our steep Welsh valleys, where there’s often not a huge amount of vegetation, it easily gets washed off, pouring into rivers whenever there are storms.’ And in Powys it rains an awful lot.

Phosphates that enter these upper reaches of the Wye have a particularly devastating effect, conservationists argue, because they allow algal blooms to sub-divide eight or nine times by the time they reach the Wye Valley, some 140 miles downstream.

Historically, algal blooms would start around Hereford, and last for a day or two. Now they begin twice as far upstream and can choke the river for weeks on end. In last summer's heatwave, one lasted for almost two months.

The knock-on effects have been most keenly felt by anglers. The Wye was once the UK's most productive salmon river outside Scotland.

In the heyday of the 1960s and 70s, monster fish weighing 30 or 40lb and 4ft in length were regularly caught, and in the 1980s, the river produced up to 6,000 salmon annually.

By contrast, 2019 saw the Wye's worst ever fishing season, with just 340 landed (all of them were returned so they could continue their journey upstream to spawn).

Salmon populations are declining everywhere, of course, and it's foolish to blame any single factor for their demise. But when a species is on the brink, every additional threat causes real damage.

'The blooms started 10 to 15 years ago,' says Adam Fisher, a professional guide who runs the Angling Dreams fishing store in Ross-on-Wye.

'At first, it was once a year for a few days, but they have got worse and worse. In a bloom, fish can't see food. Weeds can't grow. That means there's less for them to eat, and less cover for them to hide from predators.'

'It's not just a problem for us. Visitors come to canoe, or walk, or sit by the river. It was always a clear paradise, but now the river often looks lifeless.'

Maurice Hudson, an angler who runs fisheries on a stretch of the Wye Valley, told reporters recently: 'The part of the river where I fish was always best in low-water levels in spring and summer. Now the river is thick with algae at these times, meaning it is impossible to fish. You can't even find small creatures in the shallows any more.'

Ask who's to blame for this ecological catastrophe, and you'll generally get one of two answers.

The first villain is Powys County Council, whose Conservative administration has close ties to the farming industry. It has declined a mere five planning applications for IPUs in the past five years and approved 137. The CPRW says this fact is causing 'environmental catastrophe.'

Darrell Shepherd, who runs one of ten Powys residents' groups who wrote to the council this month calling for a moratorium on new chicken sheds — their request was rejected — says: 'These are the agricultural equivalent of factories. If I tried to build something the same size in a rural area causing the same amount of pollution, they would laugh in my face. But if you are going to stick animals in it, they just wave it through.'

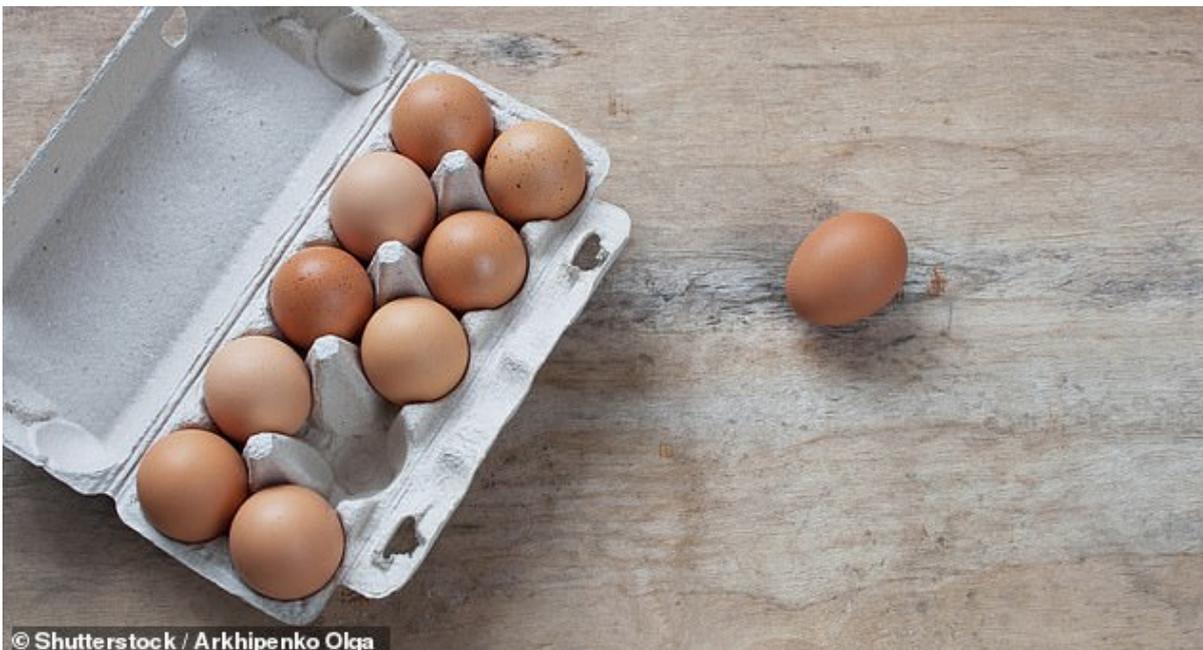
In a statement, Powys Council said it is 'fully aware of its statutory duty to conserve and enhance biodiversity' and insisted all planning applications are 'assessed under habitats regulations'.

The other organisation facing severe criticism is Natural Resources Wales [NRW], the Welsh Government's equivalent of Natural England, which has long been nicknamed 'not really working' by conservationists on account of the fact that Wales has for years suffered some of the worst agricultural pollution levels in Britain.

It has powers to block or hinder new poultry developments on environmental grounds but rarely uses them. By contrast, NRW's English counterpart has taken extensive steps in recent years to curb new IPU's over the border.

Marc Willimont, an assistant director at Herefordshire County Council, told a Sunday newspaper that Natural England is refusing to sign off new building in the upper half of his county to curb pollution, particularly around the River Lugg, a major tributary of the Wye. 'No such restriction seems to exist across the border in Wales,' he said.

When I asked, Natural Resources Wales was unable to say whether it had opposed a single application to build an IPU in the Wye catchment area in recent years. It was also unable to tell me how many poultry farmers — if any — it had fined or otherwise sanctioned in recent years for breaching waste management rules by disposing of chicken manure incorrectly.



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In a statement, NRW said 'we work closely with the agricultural industry to minimise nutrient run-off into rivers' and blamed recent algal blooms on low water levels and sunny weather which 'combine to warm water temperatures'.

The agency insisted that 'long-term phosphate levels in the Wye catchment have been declining' but a spokesman was unable to say what data this claim was based on.

In response, the WUF said that NRW changed the way it measured phosphate levels in 2016, rendering historical comparisons meaningless (NRW did not comment on this claim).

There is, of course, a third group of people responsible for turning Powys into the UK's poultry capital, with all the knock-on effects that entails: the nation's shoppers. In other words, you and I.

Britons eat 13 billion eggs a year and demand has soared thanks to the lockdown baking craze, with sales at Waitrose up 50 per cent. We also consume ever greater quantities of chicken but expect to pay as little as £2.99 for a whole bird.

Against that backdrop, the farming industry follows the money, and in a beautiful part of the world with cheap land and easy access to processing facilities and major egg firms, it's hardly surprising to see vast chicken sheds springing up.

'The truth is that we have no argument with chicken farmers,' says Simon Evans. 'They are often very helpful indeed.'

Each year, his organisation carries out work to limit phosphate pollution on free-range egg farms.

'Everyone does their best. But we only have resources to retrofit drainage on four or five farms a year.

Then, last week, Powys council approved four more massive new chicken farms. When they already have a river that is going green.' And so the Wye continues to die.