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The Observer **Pollution**

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‘It's like pea soup’: poultry farms turn Wye into wildlife death trap

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Pollution

Phosphate-rich runoff from free-range chickens is causing the spread of algal blooms that devastate the river's ecosystem

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Brockweir on the River Wye. Conservationists say the pollution from free-range poultry farms is now seriously damaging the river. Photograph: David Cheshire/Alamy

The beauty of the River Wye has been acclaimed for centuries. “If you have never navigated the Wye, you have seen nothing,” wrote the travel writer William Gilpin 250 years ago. And its reputation still makes it a magnet for visitors who regularly vote it one of the country's most beautiful rivers.

But conservationists have warned that the Wye, which meanders south from the craggy peaks of mid-Wales to the lush pastures of the Severn estuary, is today under serious threat – and from an unusual source. They say the pollution from increasing numbers of free-range poultry farms near its banks is now seriously damaging the river.

Chicken excrement rich in phosphates and other chemicals gets spread on the ground around sheds and is being flushed into the river, causing deadly algal blooms to spread. And the problem is becoming increasingly severe as more and more free-range poultry farms are built near the 134-mile-long river. River plants such as ranunculus are being suffocated, oxygen is taken from the water, and the river's brown trout, chubb and barbel are dying off, removing food for birds such as the kingfisher.

“The Wye looks like French onion or pea soup at times,” said Simon Evans of the [Wye and Usk Foundation](#), an environmental charity which has just completed a major study of the health of the Wye. “We have always had algal blooms on the river but these have been mild. However, over the past few years, they have been getting worse and are appearing earlier in the year – and lasting longer.”

The blooms – which are fuelled by phosphates and triggered by sunshine – are also occurring further and further upstream, Evans added. “They used to appear in mid-river areas around Hereford, for example, but now they are appearing far upstream in water that used to be clear and clean all the time.”

Evans is clear about the culprit. “The amount of phosphate from agriculture that is pouring into the Wye has increased enormously over the past few years,” he told the *Observer*. “We are getting double the amounts they were getting only a few years ago, and it is free-range poultry farms that are the main problem.”

With chickens allowed to wander around out of doors on free-range farms (as opposed to broiler units where they are kept inside), the birds deposit their phosphate-rich excrement across the ground, and rain flushes this into streams and eventually the Wye. The phosphates then trigger blooms when the sun comes out. Oxygen is removed from the water and plants and fish die off.

“If this goes on, we will lose everything that we treasure about the Wye. It will turn a horrible, ugly green every time it gets sunny. The fish will go, and they will be followed by our kingfishers, our dippers and our herons. It is very, very worrying.

“We are not against free-range poultry farms,” added Evans. “The issue is where they should be constructed. They should not be erected in places where their runoff can pollute rivers like the Wye. It is a very important planning issue, yet Powys county council is allowing more and more to be given the go-ahead.”

According to the Wye and Usk Foundation, 20 new free-range chicken sheds were approved for the area last year, and another 11 are currently being considered by planners.

However, a spokesperson for Powys county council said the council was fully aware of its statutory duty to conserve and enhance biodiversity, adding: “All planning applications are publicised by the council, and we welcome any comments or evidence on their potential impacts on the environment, or other matters, so that these can be fully considered as part of the application's determination.”