



**Minutes of River Otter Himalayan Balsam Meeting**  
**24 April 2014**  
**Rolle Estates Office**

In Attendance		Apologies	
Catherine Chatters	CC	Cllr Roy Coombs (Honiton)	
Nick Ward (East Budleigh Group)	NW		
Barry Wilson (East Budleigh Group)	BW		
Rob Jones (Hawkerland)	RJ		
Bryn Thomas (Natural England)	BT		
Simon McHugh (Env. Agency)	SM		
David Hatch (OVA)	DH		
Iain Ure (OVA)	IU		
Jim Pyne (lower Otter farmer)	JP		
Mish Kennaway (Tale Valley Trust)	MK		
Mervyn Newman (Axe Invasives)	MN		
Louis Wooley (Axe Invasives)	LW		
Ted Swann (Newton Poppleford)	TS		
John Harding (Tipton St John)	JH		
Val Ranger (Harpford)	VR		
Roland Stonex (FWAF SW)	RS		
Clare James (CDE)	CJ		
Yog Watkins (west Country Rivers Trust)	YW		
John Wilding (CDE)	JW		
Sam Bridgewater (CDE)	SB		

## 1 Information and Key Decisions

<b>1.1</b>	SB greeted the group; highlighted publication on 16 <sup>th</sup> April 2014 of Invasive Non-native Species Report by House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee; introductions of group made; predominance of parties from lower Otter region i.e. Ottery downstream.



<b>1.2</b>	<p>Presentation by Catherine Chatters on successes and lessons learnt from HB control work in New Forest. Key lessons learnt: volunteers vital &amp; public awareness vital; planning at catchment scale vital; engagement of landowners vital. CC highlighted diverse group of volunteer parties involved: scouts/brownies; university placements; corporate staff days; fishing clubs (lessons to be learnt for Otter?). Flagged up Health &amp; Safety issues i.e. need for risk assessments, with some participating groups (e.g. Wildlife Trust) having insurance covering volunteer coordinators. Highlighted useful adoption of 'River Champions' to monitor areas 'post initial clearance' . Usefulness of landowner's showing appreciation (parties/BBQ etc.). Highlighted motivations of volunteers: positive include 'looking after the env. and 'making a difference'. Volunteers seem to enjoy most 'job satisfaction' and 'social interaction'. Like least 'rain' and 'mud'. Talk highlighted challenges of clearance from roads and railways where access is problematic; also difficulty of predicting start and end of clearance season and 'finding' landowners (use of land registry). Lessons learnt from New Forest that baseline data and subsequent monitoring is important.</p>
<b>1.3</b>	<p>RS gave background to origin of River Otter Himalayan Balsam Project, with FWAG's involvement starting in 2012 (although other parties were clearing HB prior to this time). Initial scope was for three years. Initial funding from EA which was reduced dramatically after year one; aim was to clear HB from target tributaries within 3 years, the approach being: a) undertake baseline surveys, b) blitz and engage, 3) step back, with hopefully sufficient momentum that programme would continue under own steam subsequently.</p> <p>Highlighted that education of farmers still required. Potential to be fined by Rural Payment Agencies with impact on Single Farm Payment etc.</p> <p>Generally greater engagement on lower Otter than further up the catchment.</p>
<b>1.4</b>	<p>YW provided overview of initial survey work through walking tributaries; highlighted that quality of data constrained by time and that only main tributaries walked</p>
<b>1.5</b>	<p>Each group then gave overview of work and issues:</p> <p>SB clarified that CDE has a position statement in place re. HB that commits to stating staff effort employed/areas worked (available on CDE website); stated happy to act as hub for mapping of HB in lower Otter; confirmed CDE's commitment to engage with issue; highlighted that CDE could provide assistance with mechanical/chemical control where appropriate.</p>



NW highlighted achievements of East Budleigh group (estimated 90% reduction in year one); highlighted Old Swamill site as priority and desirability of extending work into main river valley. Expressed need for greater publicity/engagement.

RJ stated that HB is reasonably well controlled in upper Back Brook, but only really due to long term vigilance and work of local residents; raised issue of fencing of livestock from rivers (promoted under Catchment Sensitive Farming) and how it can reduce control of HB at such sites. Stated that fishing syndicates/groups (eg. River Otter Association) are useful for finding out about land ownership around rivers) where land ownership is problematic to clarify (an issue raised by JH)

IU provide an overview of OVA work/successes on Colaton Brook. Emphasised need for continuous (but reduced) effort over many years once initial clearance done. Knowle Brook highlighted as tributary that at present doesn't have active group clearing (Budleigh in Bloom in past); expressed desire of OVA to see greater public engagement/publicity. Proposed idea of a demonstration plot and 'demonstration days' on main Otter valley to engage public further; also need for more notices/promotional literature; awareness of general public still poor. Believed that there could and should be greater engagement with/from Parish Councils.

JP expressed concern about spreading of HB in lower Otter from main valley eastwards onto tenant farmer land; stated that farmers needed assistance as problem too big to tackle alone (SB agreed and highlighted need to tackle HB beginning to spread eastwards from Northmostown)

MK and MN provided overview of successes of Tale Valley Trust and Axe Invasives Project

VR highlighted erosional (silt) deposits as a source of balsam infestation on previously balsam free land downstream, with Harpford being one area where this seems to occur through silt runoff from Harpford Woods.

TS gave overview of work on Back Brook; stated that there has been difficulty in getting sufficient volunteers

CJ stated that CDE contacted 30 tenant farmers and all paddock holders/allotment holders in 2013 highlighting responsibility to address HB problem, with info. sheets provided. Follow up letters to be sent in 2014; highlighted that main CDE farm on Otter valley is organic and spraying is not possible.



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	<p>JW stated that CDE can provide mechanical assistance (e.g. tractor and flail) where terrain allows and use of chemicals (where env. allows); pointed out that farming activities restrict spread with HB tending to be on margins of fields (hedgerows etc.)</p>
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1.6	<p><b>Agreement of Strategy/Priorities for 2014 to 2015</b></p> <p>Groups to continue focusing on existing areas of work on tributaries and to continue eradicating populations that are not in main valley; once tributaries clear, concept of Himalayan Balsam Wardens/Champions to be investigated to monitor whilst walking; priority to raise profile of project through PR campaign and demonstration plots/days adjacent to river between Otterton and Budleigh.</p>
1.4	<p><b>Volunteer Group support needs /concerns</b></p> <p>Primary support identified was need for greater involvement/understanding of public (PR/leaflets/posters/demonstration plots/days etc.), and need for assistance to co-ordinate some of this (printing costs etc.)</p> <p>Potential of funding was discussed. SM (EA) and RS (FWAG) stated that some funding support might be possible and they would investigate and report back</p> <p>CDE to support with mechanical/chemical support where appropriate</p>
1.5	<p><b>Health &amp; Safety, Access &amp; Training</b></p> <p>CJ (CDE) stated that CDE was appreciative of support and is happy to allow access on CDE land for purpose of clearing HB; stated need to contact her prior to visiting sites so that in-house farmers and tenant farmers can be notified.</p> <p>The desirability of ensuring volunteers are briefed and that risk assessments are undertaken by organisers was highlighted.</p> <p>The desirability of volunteer parties being covered by insurance was also highlighted.</p>
1.6	<p><b>Co-ordination of work/communication</b></p> <p>The desirability of a website was discussed (but not agreed)</p> <p>The desirability of a part time co-ordinator was also discussed (but not agreed)</p>
1.7	<p><b>Mapping, recording &amp; monitoring work</b></p> <p>SB showed the group a map of Himalayan balsam in the lower Otter and attempts to map who is working where. He agreed to continue mapping all activities/HB populations if he is provided with the information; the need to move from mapping presence/absence to a system that provides more detail on population was discussed.</p>
	<p><b>Publicity/volunteer recruitment and demonstration plots</b></p> <p>It was agreed that greater effort needed to be made with PR to improve engagement and that demonstration plots/days in the lower Otter would be valuable. SB expressed concern about focusing too much effort on main floodplain area until tributaries clear as such clearance might be very disheartening to</p>

	volunteers due to annual seed being brought down from upstream. His preferred primary focus still to be on tributaries and outlying areas.
<b>1.7</b>	<b>Actions</b>  SM (EA) and RS (FWAG) to investigate if funding may be available to assist  SB to continue undertaking of mapping and liaise with groups working on CDE land  CDE to assist groups with staff days and mechanical/chemical support where necessary  Strengthen PR campaign and broaden request for support (to include agencies/organisations/Parish Councils etc.)  Establish demonstration plots/days on lower Otter for purposes of engaging public