

**Opinion:** The next big step in healing the Northwest's environment is to make the Mersey whole again, says Dr Keith Hendry.

# MOVING THE

Dr Keith Hendry is an aquatic scientist with many years of experience in water quality and fisheries management. He is managing director of aquatic consultancy firm APEM Ltd.

What is it about salmon and the epic migrations they make that captures our imaginations and reminds us of nature's majesty and power? Perhaps it's that wildlife filmmakers have become so adept at portraying the salmon's story. We follow their perilous journey from the open ocean back to the rivers and streams where they were born, battling strong currents, leaping waterfalls and dodging hungry seals along the way. Or perhaps it's because the filmmakers most often show us the mass runs of Sockeye salmon returning to the streams of Alaska's still-pristine wilderness.

So it's a surprise to discover that for most of its history the River Mersey too saw mighty annual salmon runs of our own native

**"For most of its history the River Mersey saw mighty annual runs of Atlantic Salmon."**

species, Atlantic Salmon. As late as the 1700s workers on the river complained of having too much fish to eat. That all ended with the terrible poisoning of our environment that accompanied the industrial revolution. By the 1970s the Mersey and many of its tributaries were a kind of toxic soup that no fish could survive in, let alone salmon, which demand cleaner water than most species.

Who would have thought back in 1985, at the outset of the Mersey Basin Campaign, that salmon would be breeding in one of the river's headwaters a mere twenty years later?

The discovery of young salmon in the River Goyt this summer is a landmark in the restoration of the Northwest's environment. There can be no doubt that the water quality improvements in the catchment are nothing less than startling. It is an outstanding achievement and all involved, including the Campaign, United Utilities, the Environment Agency and Peel Holdings should be justifiably proud.

But a handful of young fish in one tributary hardly constitutes a return to the Mersey's great salmon runs of centuries ago. The

# MERSEY

question is how to protect and encourage their return. And that will demand some really visionary thinking. It will mean tackling an engineering project on a scale rarely seen in the Northwest since the Victorians. It will mean moving the Mersey.

One of the major obstacles that remains for migratory fish in the Mersey is the poor water quality in the Manchester Ship Canal, which the river joins for several kilometres near Davyhulme in Manchester (the other is impassable weirs, but while fish-passes around them are expensive, they are easy to build). Indeed, most experts had assumed that the Ship Canal remained too polluted for salmon to move through.

We don't have to look far to see what happens when salmon are caught in poor quality water. The recovery of salmon on the River Tyne has been dramatic, making it the most prolific salmon river in England. But problems remain. When water quality in the Tyne falls – most commonly in hot summers – substantial numbers of migratory fish like salmon and sea trout pay the penalty.

The same thing could easily happen in the Ship Canal. It would be ironic if the return of breeding salmon also heralded a return to fish dying on the Mersey in large numbers. What is needed is a long term solution to the threat of periodic and regular deteriorations in water quality.

The only realistic answer is to reconnect the Mersey with its headwaters by cutting a new seven kilometre river channel adjacent to the Ship Canal through Partington.

Some may consider cutting a new channel utter madness, but who would have considered the presence of salmon in the Goyt conceivable even a few months ago? Moreover, such an engineering scheme would have been a mere trifle to the Victorians, who built the Ship Canal in the first place. Let's think big and leave an eternal legacy for future generations by making the Mersey whole again.

Perhaps one day we'll see TV pictures of salmon streaming in huge numbers up the River Mersey. What better way to prove to ourselves and to a sceptical world that the once damaged environment of the industrial Northwest is, after all, well on the way to recovery?

#### MORE INFORMATION

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