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LAUNCH OF REPORT INVESTIGATING SOURCES OF FAECAL POLLUTION AND RISKS IN THE RIVER KENT

The Clean River Kent Campaign (CRKC), in collaboration with the University of Sheffield, has published [a new study](#) looking at the nature of faecal pollution in the River Kent, Cumbria, focused on samples taken above and below two wastewater treatment works (WwTW) at Staveley and Kendal.

The study clearly indicates that Staveley WwTW is a significant source of human faecal pollution and potentially pathogenic bacteria in the river Kent. Given its upstream location of the settlements of Burneside and Kendal, this is a particular concern.

Above Staveley WwTW the human faecal content of river water was around half that of ruminant, but below the WwTW the human content increased to around five times that of ruminant.

River water samples, collected by CRKC volunteers were analysed using a molecular DNA technique known a Microbial Source Tracking (MST). This looks for genetic markers in the bacteria that are unique to human and to ruminant intestinal sources. MST also identifies the presence of potentially harmful bacteria species for both wildlife and humans.

Results showed that the WwTW's are significant faecal sources of pollution in the river, which increased during warmer periods and following heavy rainfall. Faecal bacteria levels in the river were much lower at Kendal WwTW than at Staveley WwTW, reflecting better treatment effectiveness at Kendal WwTW, which was corroborated by other bacteria markers of faecal

pollution. These findings point to Staveley WwTW being the most significant source of human faecal pollution in the River Kent.

Pathogenic bacteria capable of causing disease in humans were identified that are associated with a range of illnesses, such as severe pneumonia, gastrointestinal problems and wound infections, although in low proportion. Many were opportunistic pathogens, largely only a significant risk to susceptible individuals. Pathogenic bacteria that are potentially harmful to wildlife were also identified.

The presence of bacteria DNA does not conclusively mean the organisms are viable and capable of causing disease, but it does signal a potential risk. More needs to be understood about the harmfulness of these potential pathogens both to humans and wildlife.

John Soady, CRKC lead on Citizen Science said: *“Currently the health of the public and ecology are underrated in analyses of river water quality. There is no monitoring by any UK agency of the microbial content in the River Kent or the potential associated risk for both humans and wildlife, despite its ecological importance. This needs to change.”*

Notes to editors:

1. The Clean River Kent Campaign (CRKC), established in Autumn 2021, is a voluntary coalition of communities living along the river Kent, Cumbria. Our aim is to keep the river Kent clean for water-based recreation and to protect wildlife and ecology. CRKC is not allied to any political party.
2. CRKC, and our team of trained volunteers, have 3 years of experience in high quality citizen science, working with University of Cumbria, Freshwater Watch, Surfers Against Sewage, University of Lancaster and currently University of Sheffield.
3. The river Kent is designated as an SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest) and SAC (Special Area of Conservation) with several critically endangered species including the freshwater pearl mussel, the white clawed crayfish and the bullhead.
4. CRKC successfully campaigned in 2023 to get the Staveley WwTW upgraded. United Utilities is underway with a multi-million-pound upgrade at Staveley. To date, sewer relining work has been completed and the capacity of the treatment works is being expanded. The work will be completed in 2027, delivering reduction in spills and other improvements. United Utilities has stated its continued support to work with the

Clean River Kent Campaign and other Agencies to drive further improvements in water quality. [Further information here.](#)

5. Read the [University of Sheffield report here.](#) Read [CRKC's accompanying report here.](#)
6. The report was funded by [The Patagonia Foundation](#) and [Woodleigh Impact](#)
7. Contact Clean River Kent Campaign: istoddart@gmail.com / 07952 786621 for more information, interviews, quotes, or images.
8. Further general information: <https://www.cleanriverkentcampaign.co.uk/>

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