

# The Ripple Effect

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Wessex Archaeology partnered with the Environment Agency and artist James Aldridge to deliver an innovative, two-year heritage wellbeing project, The Ripple Effect. Taking inspiration from and working alongside the Environment Agency's flood and environmental improvement project, the Salisbury River Park Scheme, the project enabled participants to gain unique insights into the ambitious flood prevention scheme and the impact of environmental change on this habitat.



*A chance for all to develop a deeper understanding of the Environment Agency's work at Hengistbury Head (All photos: Wessex Archaeology)*

Drawing on the interconnectivity of people and place, the project drivers were improving wellbeing and fostering behavioural changes through positive engagement with experts. Closely aligned with the key objectives of the scheme, our project encouraged public participation. This led to the participants – guardians of the river – developing connections with the landscape and each other and a deeper understanding of the Environment Agency's work. By exploring the themes of heritage,

archaeology and ecology, participants gained a stronger sense of community and belonging through their shared experiences. A participant who had recently moved to the area said, 'I feel more part of the city. This feels like my home.'

*'It's felt like a real privilege to be included and involved. We've been given a personal insight into the work being undertaken and how this is going to benefit Salisbury for the next half century.'* – Participant



A creative panel of the resulting Ripple Exhibition



A walk along the riverbank to discover how the scheme will improve resilience to flooding



'Blue' and 'green' therapy can improve mental health

## PROJECT STRUCTURE

The Ripple Effect was designed with two core phases. Our project methodology and evaluation framework were formed around the New Economics Foundation's Five Steps to Wellbeing: Connect, Be Active, Take Notice, Keep Learning, Give.

In 2022 the group explored the theme of 'Telling the Story of Salisbury's relationship with the River Avon, through people, place and purpose.' In the second year, the theme was 'Becoming a good ancestor', which included sessions with The Wiltshire Wildlife Trust. The process of walking, observing, recording and mapping in creative ways raised awareness of the environment, the participants' wellbeing and how they recorded their responses to what they were experiencing.

From observing fish 'rescues' and vole releases as part of the scheme's environmental management to holding Palaeolithic handaxes and discussing deep time with our geoarchaeologists, woven into the design of every experience was the theme of personal resilience and recovery, which directly mirrors that of the environment.

The themes also allowed participants and project staff to immerse themselves in the finer details of the scheme to understand how it will improve resilience to flooding in Salisbury. Access to and engaging with experts meant people heard first-hand from risk management authorities about the importance of the work and what direct action they can take to raise awareness within the community.

*'From the sessions, I have been informed of The River Park Scheme in a way I could never have imagined. Being taken to the source. Meeting those involved and having the scheme explained from the horse's mouth as it were.'* – Participant

## REAPING THE BENEFITS

Using archaeology and heritage to engage the group resulted in more understanding of the area's history, how the landscape has changed through time and how, over thousands of years, people have changed with the river. Sessions included walks through the scheme site, with geoarchaeologists discussing how the landscape has changed to 'river dipping' – identifying and drawing the species that help ecologists identify how healthy a river is. To embed their sense of place and responsibility participants were invited to share their experiences and memories of the River Avon and other rivers. Developing this personal connection to the project engendered a sense of improved wellbeing, in line with research that shows that engagement with 'blue' and 'green' therapy can improve mental health.

Throughout the project, we encouraged participants to document their experiences creatively, using art, photography, film and the written word to make sense of what they were learning and what they wanted to achieve. Art gives people the time and space they need to process their thoughts and consider their actions. This creative process enabled us to disseminate our learning to the wider community – the ripples of the project – where we were able to share the positive impacts of the scheme by reaching people that the project team would not otherwise have been able to engage with. The participants took it upon themselves to share what they know about the scheme online, as well as sharing their personal journeys with family and friends.

*‘Making art helps Ripple Effect participants to explore their existing relationship with the River Avon and how that might change over time as the river itself changes. Sharing memories of previous experiences of the river has given us a chance to explore our emotional connection with it and how the life of the river is interwoven with our own lives through everyday experiences and key life events. As we continue as a group to record what we notice about the river’s ecology, and we learn about the potential impact of climate breakdown on its communities of life, we start to imagine how our own lives will change as a result and the actions we might take to better take care of the river and each other.’* – James Aldridge, artist

Andy Wallis, Salisbury River Park Senior User, Environment Agency, explains *‘A lot of the focus around this scheme is on the flood risk reduction it will provide, but it is about so much more than that. The Ripple Effect is showcasing all the other reasons to be doing the project, including ecology, heritage, amenity and art. It has been brilliant to see the group’s interest in the Salisbury River Park Scheme develop and to be able to explain the reasons why we are doing the work. This had been a challenging period for us to engage fully with the local community, so it is especially rewarding to see the group sharing this knowledge as ambassadors for the scheme. This will bring much wider benefits and we will be definitely looking to do something similar on other projects.’*

When participating colleagues were asked for their feedback, one said *‘The Ripple Effect made me think a lot more about how we can convey often complex information to a range of different audiences. I have to admit that I was partly sceptical at the outset, never having worked on a project such as this, but it completely changed my view. Archaeology can be used as a vehicle to engage people with environmental projects*



*Developing a relationship with the River Avon through art: cyanotype prints*



*Reaping the benefits of interactive learning: handling the real collection as part of a discussion about deep time*

*such as river restoration. I think we are great storytellers in archaeology and I can see this approach being applied to other environmental projects. It really made me think about the work I do in a new way and how I present it.’*

*With credit to James Aldridge, artist and facilitator.*

## KEY OUTCOMES/MESSAGES

- using archaeology and heritage has engaged people and resulted in more understanding of the area’s history, fostering a sense of community and a feeling of responsibility towards the river
- more positive engagement with the experts has led to more understanding of the development work and its benefits
- developing a personal connection to the project has engendered a sense of improved wellbeing in the participants