Sold down the River – commerce and the River Taff

The aim of this paper is to explore the business connection with the natural resource that is the River Taff in Cardiff, arguably the most important river in Wales. The Taff’s impact is easily seen in the City of Cardiff, as it slows down and heads towards the Severn estuary having formed approximately fifty miles away in the Brecon Beacons. Historically, the location and access to the water, led to the formation of human settlements and this rich fluvial system has contributed to a variety of business developments over time. In considering these, the paper will reveal the relevance and application of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs).

A preliminary review of the literature reveals limited sources about the role of the river in the business and social life of Cardiff, with investigations into water quality and engineering developments predominating. One historical engineering example is that the Taff was rerouted by Isambard Kingdom Brunel, to prevent flooding in the area of the planned railway station and another example is the building of Blackweir to supply water to the docks, to flush out sediment. The disposal of discharged waste from the collieries up until 1950s and resulting polluted water with loss of nature impacted on the local reactions to the River seeing large amounts of fly-tipping in evidence. Sewage, litter and plastics have been highlighted widely for their detrimental effect on water quality and these feature in a study as recently as 1999. To justify such behaviour on the brink of the 21st century was a suggestion that council waste services were limited as was public knowledge. Greater awareness is evidenced in Natural Resources Wales research showing that older people and those who have spent time living in a community have greater awareness of the water quality of the river although concerns about river conservation are lying predominantly with the retired.

This evolution of thinking is reflected in the ‘Making Peace with Nature’ paper associated with the UNSDG 3 acknowledging man-made environmental damage and the importance of greenspace in the world today, in particular to support good mental health, a topic that has gained momentum since the pandemic. Other relevant goals include Goal 6 which places emphasis on the importance of clean water and sanitation, including the sustainable management of water resources and this fits in the River Taff case example, illustrating Goal 7’s aspiration for Affordable and Clean Energy. Cardiff City Council has already taken advantage of the fast-flowing waters and height differences on the River Taff and established a hydroelectric energy scheme (helped by financial incentives). Another sign of progress is The Wales Better River Quality Taskforce, an offshoot of Welsh Government bringing together regulators, government and water companies showing how partnerships are needed to work together to achieve sustainable development goals (Goal 17). The application of Goal 11 may also be cited as relevant as its content guides cities’ businesses to create both sustainable opportunities and reductions in negative environmental and resource impacts.

Drawing upon a range of sources including oral histories like those stored in the Sound and Moving Image archive in the British Library, the significance of the River Taff in the business life of surrounding communities and visitors will be investigated. Geography, history and habitat are all important aspects of understanding a river and embedded within these subjects are the social and indigenous histories that shape the way that a river is incorporated into everyday lives and whether the river is respected and treated with care. Commercial developments on and around the River Taff began in medieval times with the creation of water mills and the Industrial Revolution drove more commerce on the water with for example of the MelinGriffith Tinplate works. In more recent times, commerce has been connected with leisure pursuits and Ken Evans, an enthusiastic angler and lover of the River Taff chose to self-publish his own book to record his memories and experiences providing a wonderful insight into the river as a natural resource The valuable parkland either side of the banks of the River Taff was purchased by the Council and stretch north providing attractive greenspace for sport and play. The Taff trail follows the riverbank as a leisure route stretching for 55 miles and is a space for cyclists, runners and walkers, anglers and nature lovers and creates debates about priorities in the conflicts created by multiple users. Smells, sights and sounds reflect the river’s vicissitudes, with most seeing the river as benign (possibly taking its features for granted) until there is dramatic change in increased water levels after heavy rain prompting a fear of flooding. Storm Dennis in 2020 had a devastating effect impacting the local water taxi service which had to be abandoned.

Cardiff City Council claims that the city needs to grow in a resilient way with an aspiration to become a One Planet City by 2050. The holistic consideration of the River as a resource for the city of Cardiff over time as well as the review of the current situation of the businesses that rely on the River Taff in a variety of forms, will enhance a deeper understanding of the role of the river in the identity of the city, its placemaking value and also the river’s integrated role in any future strategy by the council and the business community. The relevance and application of the UNSDGs show an overlapping interdisciplinary significance and call for integration in understanding of the River Taff for a sustainable future.

This exploration and investigation into the River Taff and its role in the commercial role of the city and Cardiff along with consideration the UNSDGs, comes at a time when nature is gaining a legal footing and while the integration of nature has been automatic in many indigenous cultures, there is more likely to be an absence of thinking in this way in the UK. The river is photogenic and adds blue space to the current image of Cardiff but research into its overall value appears to be rare.

1003 words

Key words

River Taff, Cardiff, UNSDGS, sustainability

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