

DEGRADED RIVER VALLEY

Landscape character

The degraded river valley landscape type can be found in only one landscape unit the Lower Aire Valley (LCM20). It is characterised by an open, broad river valley, with gently sloping sides, leading down into a degraded landscape, dominated by human activity. The valley is covered by a chaotic mix of spoil heaps and lagoons linked to past and present mining activities, major excavations, and industrial buildings.

Although most of the area is degraded, intact isolated pockets of arable farmland still occur alongside areas of parkland. The degraded river valley is a continually changing landscape, with new areas of restored land and wetland areas forming increasingly attractive features as they develop. The valley forms a major communication corridor, with lines of pylons, roads and canals clearly evident.

Forces for change

The degraded river valley landscape type has undergone a tremendous amount of change due mainly to past and present mineral extraction, landfill and industrial activities, which have left a legacy of derelict and degraded land. Where activities have ceased, some of the restored sites are beginning to mature, forming important wildlife habitats and landscape features and further influencing landscape change.

There are pockets of more intact parkland and arable farmland landscapes which have undergone less change in recent years although there appears to have been a decline in the condition of traditional parkland and characteristic farmland features. These areas are under pressure from urban fringe and



development pressures, such as road building proposals, particularly along the edge of the main built-up area of Leeds and around former mining settlements.

Management strategy and guidelines

The overall management strategy for the degraded river valley should be a combination of enhancement through the creation of a new landscape character, combined with restoration and conservation of the more intact areas of parkland and arable farmland. Enhancement could take the form of new woodland planting and the creation of a diverse range of habitats, particularly in areas which are degraded and despoiled as a result of past extraction and industrial activities.

Management guidelines which are applicable for the degraded river valley landscape type are described below. Detailed management strategies and guidelines for the individual landscape unit are described in a separate document, using the reference listed above left.

- *Restoration proposals for mineral workings should be based on an assessment of landscape character in order to assess whether reinstating the original landscape or creating a new landscape is most appropriate.*

Restoration of mineral workings in the Lower Aire Valley can result in a number of different end points, such as a return to arable land or the creation of new habitats such as open water, scrub and woodland. This can result in the creation of a new type of landscape. As such, restoration schemes should take account of how the site relates to the surrounding wider landscape in order to assess the most appropriate way in which to either reinstate the original landscape or create a new landscape. Restoration of individual sites should be designed as an integral part of a wider scheme for the whole valley.

- *Retain and enhance river channel diversity and marginal vegetation.*

The river and canal channels are major features within this landscape type. Where the ecological value has declined, there is much scope for improvement through sensitive management. The retention of a diverse range of features such as meanders, shallows, cliffs and backwaters is very important. River margins are important and tree, scrub and plant growth on river banks should be retained and protected and consideration given to suitable design, where new channel diversion schemes are proposed. All these features have an intrinsic value and are integral to the visual and aesthetic quality of the riverside environment.

- *Identify opportunities for recreating riverside wetland habitats*

In recent years within the degraded river valley, new wetland habitats have emerged as extraction activities have ceased. These habitats have become particularly important for wildlife and help to give an element of naturalness to the

river landscape. Any existing wetlands should be conserved and in addition, opportunities should be sought for creating new wetlands in areas where extraction activities have been completed.

- *Enhance tree cover through small to medium scale woodland planting.*

There is scope within most of the degraded river valley landscape type for woodland planting. This is particularly the case, where mineral extraction activities have ceased leaving degraded and despoiled land with good opportunities for enhancement. The siting and design of new woods will need to be carefully planned, and undertaken as part of a wider programme for the whole area. Care should be taken to try and frame views from within, and from the outside, rather than to totally block them off. New planting could be targeted, where possible, on slightly rising ground, but particular care should be taken to shape the edges of the new woods. Where possible the natural regeneration of woodland should be encouraged as this can lend a more natural feel to the landscape. Where planting is carried out, deciduous planting would be preferable, although mixed woodlands would be acceptable as long as edges and sky lines are sensitively handled.

- *Enhance the continuity of the river and canal channels through encouragement of natural regeneration of bankside trees.*

Scattered waterside trees and scrub are important features contributing to the riverside environment. To maintain this effect, natural regeneration of trees should be encouraged, but care should be taken to maintain a variety of habitats alongside the river margin, and to avoid ecologically important sites such as unimproved grasslands and wetlands. Larger scale woodland planting along the valley floor close to the watercourses should be avoided.

- *Enhance tree cover through regeneration and replanting of field boundary trees .*
Hedgerow trees and hedges alongside roads and lanes are not a particularly significant feature at present within the degraded river valley landscape. However, where they do occur, on the slightly higher ground within the intact arable farmland, they have the effect of reinforcing the impression of enclosure. To maintain and enhance this, natural regeneration of hedgerow and roadside trees should be encouraged wherever possible, although replanting could be undertaken if necessary, using locally occurring native tree species.
- *Conserve and restore, areas of existing parkland.*
Although parks are not a common feature within this landscape, the parkland that does remain for example at Swillington, provides diversity and interest in the landscape of the river valley. With the river valley having undergone so much change in the past, this emphasises the need to conserve and manage areas which have remained relatively intact. Wherever possible it is important to retain the peaceful pastoral character of traditional parkland and to encourage new planting to replace old trees. Planting should respect the original design intentions of individual parks, or where there are several layers of design, it may be necessary to identify a particular stage of development which reflects the most important historical context. Where opportunities arise through incentives such as the Countryside Stewardship scheme to help manage existing areas, these should be investigated.
- *Seek to control field amalgamation and hedgerow loss, restoring hedges where these have been lost or are in poor condition.*
Field pattern is an important visual element along the arable farmland parts of the degraded river valley, particularly when viewed from adjacent high ground. The fields are bounded by mixed and thorn hedgerows which arc in many places becoming thin and gappy, or have been lost completely, only to be replaced by wire fencing, which results in a more open, neglected landscape. Replacement hedgerow planting or restoration through more appropriate management should be encouraged in these areas, although they should not be allowed to grow tall as this would have the effect of over enclosing the river valley.