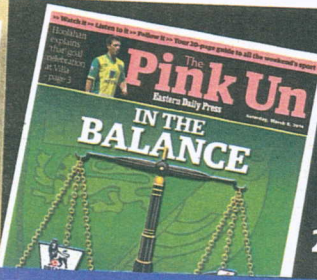


200 PAGES TODAY



Deryn says fond farewell to his Norfolk school pals

PAGE 6



Another crucial weekend for fate of the Canaries

20-PAGE PINK UN

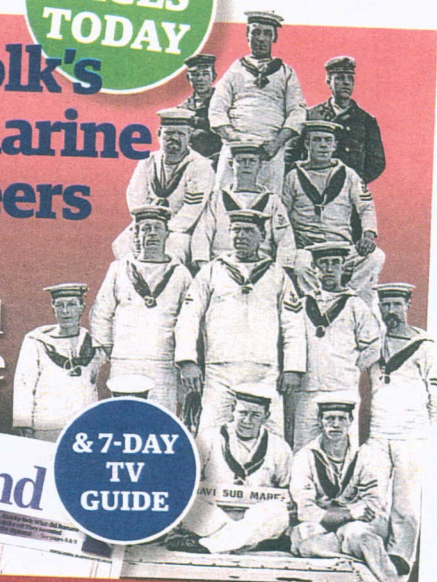
One man's fight to save a Norfolk beauty spot

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Norfolk's submarine pioneers

72-page Weekend magazine



& 7-DAY TV GUIDE



As he turns 70, Keith Skipper picks his ideal Norfolk birthday guests Page 34

GIRL IN A BILLION

Mother thanks all those who helped save daughter Madeline

Rowan Mantell
rowan.mantell@archant.co.uk

Little Madeline Reeder will celebrate her fourth birthday later this month. But in that time she has never tasted ice cream or eaten a biscuit.

The youngster was born with a condition so rare just seven people out of the world's seven billion share it. It does not even have a name.

The Lowestoft girl was born with a chromosomal abnormality leaving her facing a host of life-threatening conditions.

But 17 operations later, the little girl with big brown eyes has defied doctors, and now her mother, Sammy, 28, wants to thank those who have helped them through their darkest hours.

■ Full Story Pages 2-3



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Fen owner's ongoing fight to win

Images of flood victims on the Somerset Levels have raised the question: Does the Environment Agency listen to ordinary people? Ironically, in Norfolk, it a battle over a site that has too little water that has led a landowner to ask the very same question.

STEPHEN PULLINGER reports

It was a fight he took up six years ago with all the zeal of the boardroom battles he won during an illustrious career at the sharp end of business.

However, Tim Harris, 66, a driving force of P&O for two decades before he engineered a regional success story as chairman of marine services company, the Fisher Group, has found it far tougher to win the battle closest to his heart – the fight to save Catfield Fen.

Since learning in 2008 that the precious wildlife site largely contained on his 400-acre Catfield Hall estate was drying out, he has engaged in endless communication – represented by a table-high stack of files in his front room – with the two government bodies concerned, the Environment Agency (EA) and Natural England (NE).

Despite Mr Harris amassing a formidable bank of evidence from a top UK hydrologist and a world-leading Dutch ecologist pointing to over-abstraction of water being the root of the problem, the EA, responsible for regulating water use, is still deliberating on whether to renew two licences for abstracting water from the fen's catchment area two years after they became due.

And to his endless frustration, the NE – responsible for protecting landscapes – failed to even meet his experts for several months, citing a lack of resources.

While thoroughly hardened to



■ Tim and Geli Harris, owners of Catfield Fen - one of the top wildlife sites in country - are battling to stop water abstraction

business battles, he has found it extraordinarily tough to fight opponents who initially would not show up in the ring and then indulged in tactics far outside the Queensberry rules.

"To begin with, the EA would not even respond to me, saying they only talked to groups, not individuals," he

said. "Then something which never happened during my entire business career occurred. I was defamed by the EA and NE in a briefing to then minister Richard Benyon which accused me of making 'numerous accusations' and 'accusations of foul play'."

Mr Harris, who has since received

a written apology for the remarks, said his constituency MP Norman Lamb – who has twice unsuccessfully asked for the abstraction licences renewal decision to be called in – had enjoyed no better luck in obtaining answers from the government bodies.

In a letter to the secretary of state for environment Owen Paterson in

Complex issues

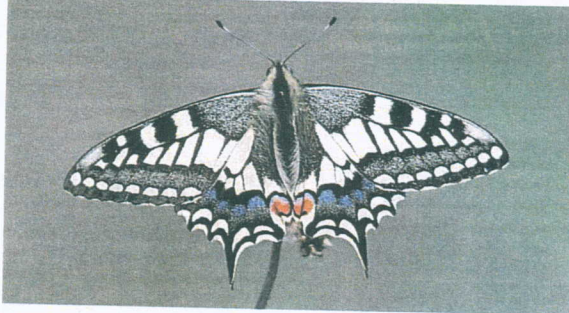
A spokesman for the Environment Agency acknowledged the time it was taking to reach a decision on the abstraction licences but said the issues were complex and there was a wealth of information to consider.

She said: "We will be formally consulting Natural England and the Broads Authority at the end of March. They will have four weeks to provide their response. At the same time as we consult with NE and BA we will make

publicly available all the documents we have considered as part of our assessment.

"In May, we aim to start a public consultation where we will present our draft decision and ask for comments from interested parties. This public consultation will last for four weeks."

A spokesman for Natural England said: "We are awaiting the outcome of the Environment Agency's assessment and will respond to it once published."



■ A swallowtail butterfly is one of the species to be found at Catfield Fen.

Picture: MATT WILKINSON



the battle that is closest to his heart



that is drying out the fen.

Picture: JAMES BASS

October, Mr Lamb said he "wanted to raise my concerns specifically with you - and personally with you as the secretary of state", but the reply came from junior minister Dan Rogerson.

And the letter did not address Mr Lamb's concerns over the groundless accusations in the briefing which "will have inevitably tainted the minister's view and judgement in deciding on the call-in application".

In a second letter to Mr Paterson

“To begin with, the EA would not even respond to me, saying they only talked to groups, not individuals

Tim Harris, owner of catfield Fen

sent last month, Mr Lamb writes: "Mr Harris, understandably, is of the opinion that these two organisations (the EA and NE) have contempt for people who challenge their views.

Unique eco system

National Farmers' Union water resources specialist Paul Hammett said: "The Broads is a unique eco system and the farmers who live and work there recognise their responsibilities to manage the countryside and protect the environment, as well as working to meet growing demand for quality British food.

"The abstraction of water from rivers and underground aquifers is essential for growing food such as potatoes, onions and carrots, but even in an agriculturally dominant county like Norfolk, the vast majority of water is taken, not by farmers, but for public supply.

"The small percentage of water abstracted for agricultural use is closely regulated by the Environment Agency, whose first duty is to protect the environment.

"It would have stopped abstraction at Catfield Fen if there was clear evidence it was causing a problem.

"Catfield Fen is undoubtedly a very important conservation site, which is why the agency continues to take a precautionary approach.

"Let's hope common sense prevails so that farmers surrounding Catfield Fen and throughout Norfolk can, through a carefully regulated licensing system, have a secure supply of water to grow our food."

Such an important site

Catfield Fen is described by the Environment Agency as the "finest unpolluted valley fen in western Europe" and is covered by the highest national and international conservation designations.

However, highlighting the latest evidence which already shows a reduction in the type of plants associated with wetter fens and a declining trend in water levels, Mr Harris said: "It is hard to repair the damage once it has been done. Unless action is taken quickly there is a danger it will be too late to save the fen."

And he warned that his battle to save such rare species as swallowtail butterfly, Norfolk hawk dragonfly and fen orchid was one he was fighting for the whole of the Broads, not just Catfield.

"Reedbed habitats are in decline right across Broadland and the 'elephant in the room' is increased water abstraction," he said.

He blamed the change of cropping in East Anglia to plants such as lettuce, sugar beet and potatoes that required more water.

Mr Harris is still awaiting the decision on whether to renew the water abstraction licences but said he would seek judicial review if they are granted, and would take the fight to Brussels if necessary.

He said: "I have spent tens of thousands of pounds so far on



■ A fen orchid.

experts and legal advice but it will be hundreds of thousands if it goes to court."

He questioned whether the response of the statutory bodies had been appropriate "to someone raising genuine and well-researched concerns".

He said: "What hope can there be for normal people if a senior minister like Norman Lamb can get no answer to his repeated questions from Owen Paterson and Defra.

"Can the statutory bodies be trusted to protect the country's internationally important nature sites, our natural Westminster Abbeys and Canterbury Cathedrals? Our experience at Catfield is far from reassuring."



"It is worth reminding you that my constituent appears to have commissioned, entirely at his own expense, the majority of the investigative work and interpretation.

"It is worth noting that the RSPB, supported by the Broads Authority, has now conducted further research which supports my constituent's views that serious damage is

being done to the site." Mr Lamb also raises the concern that the EA has failed to publish all documents relevant to the case on the dedicated web page it has set up.

■ What do you think? Write, giving full contact details, to the Letters Editor, Prospect House, Rouen Road, Norwich, NR1 1RE.



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