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START AUDIO

Interviewer: Okay Steve. You’re okay to kick off and introduce yourself and explain your connection to the wetlands for me.

Stephen: Okay so my name is [Stephen Ayers 0:00:12] and I live in Walthamstow Central which is about a five minute drive from Walthamstow Wetlands. I’ve been volunteering with London Wildlife Trust since September. It’s now the end of January.  
  
I’ve been tasking an interest in the wetlands since September 2014 – or just before that – when I went on the open house tour of the site. So I’d heard about the wetlands in the run up to that but I’d never been there.  
  
I’d seen it from the bus which I’ve heard a lot of people say because the fences block your view from the ground level, but when people go on busses down Ferry Lane, they can see the site and you think “Well I should go there at some point and investigate”.  
  
So my involvement at the wetlands at the moment is as a community engagement volunteer. I go along to the monthly tours of the site and I talk about the heritage and the history of the reservoirs and the development of the buildings there and the history of the area and I’m learning about the ecology.  
  
I’m also videoing wildlife that I see at the wetlands. I’m trying to go the wetlands once a week, making videos and then putting them on YouTube and publicising them through Twitter and a blog. I’m also videoing events like tours and the recent photo call with councillor [Coghill 0:02:15] who was launching the building of the reed beds and publicising the company that were doing that, Salix. So I’ve made the video of that.  
  
I’m also taking photographs of the development of the reed beds for the council, for Waltham Forest Council via London Wildlife Trust, I send them to Rachel and she sends them on to them. So I’m documenting the progress of the reed bed building.  
  
I’m going to be doing another video in the next few weeks. I interviewed the head-man for Salix on the site, the contracts manager, Peter [Barlow 0:02:55], one of the directors of Salix, about what they were doing there and I’ve got footage of things like the digger bucket dredging silt out of the water and building where the reed beds will be.  
  
I’ve also been to Woodberry Down and filmed the reed beds as they will be. So I’m going to put that together into a video in the next few weeks with his voice over it, talking about the technical side of what they’re doing and who they are. So making videos.  
  
One thing that I do a lot is Twitter. I spend about two hours a day tweeting and through that I’ve learned quite a bit about the local area.  
  
So I follow people like Love The Lea and other parks, Millfield’s park and Markfield and Mabley Green, all the other groups, the Save Leyton Marshes and Save Lea Marshes Campaign and also all the local birders. All the local birders – well not all of them – but there is a group of them that use Twitter a lot to communicate with each other and so I monitor what they are doing and anything they say about what birds they’ve seen, any photos they take, I retweet them. I’m going to join that group hopefully.  
  
I wonder how they take it because I've already picked up two of the prominent ones don’t like the name change from Walthamstow Reservoirs to Walthamstow Wetlands. They’ve been going to Walthamstow Reservoirs for 30 years, in some cases, and can recall the summer of ’86 when they drained one of the reservoirs and how the birds reacted to wading around in the drained reservoir.  
  
So they feel an ownership over the site and they’ve always known it as Walthamstow Reservoirs. The comment that was made was “Oh, it’s going to be another case of the ‘Disneyfication’”. Oh actually, that’s not the phrase the guy used, that’s my phrase. He said it would be like Barnes where they’ll be turning it into a theme park for birders and the real birders will suffer as a result of the majority of people coming in.

Interviewer: That’s interesting isn’t it? So they’re very wedded to an existing identity and an existing user base and actually that shift in user base to maybe a more populist and perhaps one that’s encouraging increased access is not something they’re comfortable with.

Stephen: No. They fear too many people being there and it affecting their experience of being there. I haven’t heard them say much positive things about how there will be new hides.  
  
All I’ve heard is- because I’ve not met them in person, I’m just judging from tweets and I’ve just seen this negative comment about the name change, the rebranding and the criticism of – a few criticism of – Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust in Barnes. They don’t want it to be like that and it’s not going to be.  
  
They’ve called it “The Reservoirs” or “The Ressies” for years and it’s similar. The fishermen have a- I’ve also seen a comment by one of the fishermen on a Facebook page saying that some of the birders are rather looking down their noses at the fishermen and are a bit snooty about the anglers. The fishermen also call it “The Stow” or “The Reservoirs” and they have their own way of referring to it.  
  
Instead of saying “Reservoir one, reservoir two, reservoir three” they call it “The one, the two, the three” and instead of saying “High” or “Low [Maynard 0:07:20]” they call it “The higher” or “The lower”. So there’s a slight sort of language…They also have areas of the reservoirs that they nickname, like “The Bay” or whatever and I don’t know quite where all those- but they’ve nicknamed all the areas. So they’re very worried about it all changing.  
  
An interesting thing was to see the comments that were made. My video of Claire Coghill was put on to the Facebook page for the anglers, which has 5,000 members and they made a lot of comments. And one or two of them were positive. A lot of them were mindlessly stupid and negative.  
  
Literally, repeatedly saying “Sounds like a load of old bollocks”. That was a repeated comment. The refrain.

Interviewer: (Laughter). That was their most positive contribution.

Stephen: Somebody else wrote a lengthy comment and again it was completely misinformed, misguided, very, very suspicious and paranoid. I’ve detected from the – this is all just answering your question “How am I connected to the-”.  
  
So I’ve seen paranoid amongst the anglers in that one of them – when I put that video on – said “Is fishing going to continue at all on the site?” and I said “Yes it will continue as is, pretty much unchanged. There will be changes but it’s still going to be the largest fishery in London run by Thames Water”. He was like “Oh great. That’s good news” but it was coming from the angle of “It might all be stopped”.

Interviewer: The assumption. So he’d come from a very negative assumption?

Stephen: Yes. He may have been over-playing that because in later discussions, they are quite informed and aware of what’s happened in other nature reserves that have had angling in them and they are aware that over the course of time, areas will be closed off to them and they will only be allowed to fish in certain areas and that’s what they are fearing coming in.

Interviewer: And yet, there has been a considerable amount of effort by Will and the rangers to communicate that actually, they’re a very fated stakeholder group.

Stephen: Who’s Will?

Interviewer: Will Barnard the Fisheries manager?

Stephen: Okay, yes. So I know his name actually and I know his Twitter.

Interviewer: Yes. So he’s the Fisheries manager and he works for Thames Water and he runs the angling academy and obviously he’s quite big in fishing himself. I think he’s made a considerable effort to make it clear what is going on.

Stephen: Have you seen that video of the Walthamstow Wetlands consultation process?

Interviewer: No actually.

Stephen: It was made in 2013 and it was put onto YouTube last summer, but it was on Vimeo before that. In it, you can see representatives of the angling and the local carp fishermen and all the rest of it, talking around a table about their fears about health and safety. Clearly it’s showing the consultation going on and you have people talking to camera like birders and the like.

Interviewer: Yes. Okay, I’ll look that up.

Stephen: Yes, I’ll send you a link to it.

Interviewer: That would be brilliant. Yes, very much so. So we’ll come back on to that, there is so much good stuff to cover but if I could just come back to yourself and your role as [future engagement 0:11:05] volunteer. My first question around that is what is your motivation for being involved and the role that you’ve adopted and helped evolve?

Stephen: My primary goal is to be at the wetlands as much as possible. Why I like the wetlands to really savour the experience and through videoing and taking photos. I’m more into video and I find that videoing birds and then watching back, you see things that you didn’t see at the time.  
  
Especially when there’s lots of birds and I was filming them quite slowly, I’ll see things I didn’t see at all at the time. Partly because at the time you’re looking at a little screen on the camera and then at home you can see it on a big screen. So it helps me-  
  
Also it’s a real pleasure. I enjoy the creative element of the making videos and the creative element of taking photographs. There’s lots of picturesque views there that I like to capture and then I get a real enjoyment from editing the photos and adjusting them and improving them.  
  
Then, if I was to do all that and just keep that to myself, like many people do with their videos, firstly I wouldn’t do as much of it if I wasn’t sharing with other people so it pushes me to do more of something that is really a good thing for me because psychologically and health-wise to be walking around the site.  
  
I mean, I need to lose a lot of weight, so I’m part of- the reservoirs are trying to encourage people to cycle and walk and I’m part of that and when you’re chasing after birds that suddenly fly away and you’re trying to sneak up on them and you’re going up and down the sides of reservoirs, that has improved my health.  
  
Instead of just storing all that and not sharing it with anyone, I get more motivation to do the whole thing by sharing it on Twitter and sharing it on YouTube. That’s actually what I mainly want, all of that.   
  
I get pleasure from the social interaction with the other volunteers and Rachel and the visitors to the site on the monthly tours. Talking to people about something that I’m enthusiastic about and then them responding to me really positively makes me feel good and gives me good social interaction.  
  
And I’m making friends with the other volunteers, talking to local people, meeting many more local people than I would normally meet. There might just be a chat you have with somebody, one-off and never see them again, or you might see them again over a period of time connected to the wetlands as a community sort of thing.  
  
Doing the internet side of things is good because I’m learning about wildlife. So by monitoring all the different Wildlife Trust and London Wildlife Trust and all the other projects they do and the Lea Valley ranger, the local ranger and all these local people who are more informed than I am, because my background, my degree is, as you know, social anthropology. I don’t have a background in ecology or biology or science.  
  
I’m only a beginner birder, you know. I’m learning about the birds. When taking pictures of birds and then looking them up and finding out what they are and learning a lot about wildlife, I’m really enjoying this whole area of my life I hadn’t really- I’d enjoyed documentaries but I really didn’t consider myself an animal person or a nature person so much.  
  
Although I’ve been involved with green projects before, but the project I was involved with before was a community garden. It was Forest Farm Peace Garden and I did the arts events there. They had a world music day because it was a garden for migrants and refugees.  
  
So I was not involved in the food growing or the organic or the permaculture side of things. I was involved in the promotion and the music, stuff that wasn’t green so much. So I’ve had sympathies with that area and friends who are very much like Ray Mears-type characters.  
  
I mean I’ve got a friend who is qualified in bush-craft and another friend who used to be – Gareth, that I told you about, who lives in Birmingham – second top person in London Wildlife Trust. So the fact that I’ve been friends with people who have been in this area has made me realise that I like people like that and I like that kind of world of people who are attracted to that sort of thing.  
  
But I found a niche in it that within what London Wildlife Trust – as far as I can see – it doesn’t attract people who are very much into Twitter or into social media or things like that. So it’s a long way behind the media world and it’s not actually something that I’m hugely, you know-   
  
I don’t want to be sat in front of a computer myself, I want to be down in the wetlands but I’m filling a role there that other people haven’t got the experience with websites and that. I did the same thing at Forest Farm Peace Garden, I did their website as well. So I knew this would be an area that they’d need some help with.  
  
Whereas if I went in I would be- Nathaniel has a biology degree, Ella’s doing an MA in ecology. I go in and I haven’t got anything other than- well now heritage and the videos and stuff like that, but the web was part of that. Actually I want to play that down now and I’ve talked about that with Rachel. She’s quite happy for me, I think, to do that.  
  
I’ve established the Twitter feed, I’ve got about 2,000 followers now. I’ve been doing it intensely for about four months and I can’t do two hours of it a day and I’m just going to use it as an outlet for my own photos and my own videos.  
  
I will look at what the local birders are saying and I will retweet them, but I won’t be searching for every possible local group which might have an interest in the Lea Valley, which is what I’ve been doing. I’m trying to socially network within that. Which has been really interesting to learn about new parks and new groups and areas of Tottenham I don’t know.

Interviewer: And key within that role – so not only has it been a learning experience for you as sort of building an understanding of the networks that are in place – has your role also been about promoting Walthamstow Wetlands as something that these people would or should be aware of and be aware and have the opportunity to engage in?

Stephen: Yes. So by following them on Twitter, I’m drawing attention to and then by looking at what they’re tweeting and seeing how it might be relevant, if it’s relevant at all, to the Lea Valley and at times, I’ve retweeted stuff if it’s just East London.  
  
So I’ve been retweeting Rainham RSPB at Rainham or people at Wanstead. And then now, I’m just being more specific to our local area. Tottenham marshes, the wetlands, Walthamstow marshes and Hackney marshes and the Lea River, a bit of Tottenham and a bit of Walthamstow, but not everything that’s green in the North-East London area, which I was kind of including.

Interviewer: So you’ve filtrated that down.

Stephen: Yes. Trying to And what I was doing was, by finding these things, looking for tweets where they were saying something was relevant to us, liking it or retweeting it and following them made them then follow me. If I just followed them without reiterating what they were saying and including it in what I was doing, then it’s less of a good interaction. They’re less likely to follow me.

Interviewer: So you’ve been quite instrumental in the online presence for the wetlands in terms of not only very practically doing stuff, but actually raising awareness.

Stephen: I’ve been constantly trying to keep it in people’s minds locally and to some extent, I think some of the people who are local, who are very aware of the wetlands, might get fed up of constantly seeing another photograph of a digger building up silt.  
  
So they might see that regularly, but other people who look at Twitter less frequently. It’s all a matter of who is looking at the time when you tweet it. And if they’re not looking at that time, then you do have to repeat your message and keep it in the public awareness.   
  
But at the same time, trying to make the photographs really attractive and the scenery really attractive and try and make people aware. I hope that people who have never been there will see it and go “Oh, I must go there” or people that haven’t been there for a while will see it and want to go there.  
  
But I have also felt – as I was saying to you – that London Wildlife Trust is not very media-savvy, that it’s been a bit of a struggle and a bit of an uphill battle. I’ve been producing videos that could have been going on to the blog for months and they haven’t gone onto the blog.  
  
The head of communications for London Wildlife Trust has just recruited somebody else to accompany him, another person working with him and before that, Rachel was saying to me “He’s overloaded with work and he can’t cope with work”.

Interviewer: Yes. It’s just him for the whole of London Wildlife Trust.

Stephen: Yes, and it’s more than he can cope with to do it. The other thing that the problem I’ve had is they wouldn’t let me take over the – and I can understand this, it’s not a problem in a negative way, but just something to get around something to get around.  
  
A local museum, the Vestry House Museum here, because they are a small organisation, they had a volunteer – a local person that I was in contact with – who took over their Twitter account and their Facebook and did their social media for them. That’s what I would have been happy to do for the wetlands.  
  
But the wetlands didn’t want me to have control over something that had their name on it. That’s why I’m a separate entity as being “Wetlands Steve”. But I originally called myself “Walthamstow Wildlife” and didn’t want to have my own personality involved in it, really, at all.  
  
So “Wetlands Steve” it sounds like rather brash sort of promoting myself as if I am Mr Wetlands, but it actually was quite the opposite of what I wanted. I wanted to be anonymous but they wanted to make it clear that it was just an individual, not an organisation.

Interviewer: Yes, so that’s a real challenge for an organisation like that, that relies on volunteers in one sense, for all forms of activities, skills and labour and-

Stephen: I think they must be much better at managing volunteers who are helping to build a fence or dig a ditch. I’m an unusual volunteer for them and I’m not at all happy at how I’ve been managed as a volunteer with London Wildlife Trust.  
  
In fact, you know, I could have done much more work for them, but I feel like my time has been wasted a lot of the time. I’ve done a load of work and then it’s not been picked up on or not been retweeted or not been done. I have felt like I am wasting my time because Rachel can’t cope with or keep up with what I’m trying to do with her and Ian can’t either.   
  
In fact Ian has been quite- my experience was this. I was trying to e-mail with Rachel about Twitter. She was not answering my e-mails at all. I’ve got a huge number of e-mails I’ve sent that haven’t been answered and tweets not retweeted. I’ve done my bit of it and she’s not kept up with it.  
  
So I tried to communicate with Ian. Ian and David Mooney and Woodberry Wetlands were not supporting what I was doing on Twitter. They weren’t following me, they weren’t retweeting me and they weren’t being part of a team so I felt very much alone.  
  
Partly, the problem has been that I go in for a meeting once a month. You know, like an hour’s meeting with Rachel once a month. But when I first went in to Rachel, I offered to do two full days a week in her office. I’ve offered to do way more than she wanted to take on because she can’t manage it or she doesn’t want to. I don’t know, it’s left me isolated.  
  
I had the same problem at Forest Farm Peace Garden, where you work on the website and people don‘t really realise how much time you’re spending on it. It’s very difficult for them to see how much time it takes.   
  
Then, when I would go back to Forest Farm Peace Garden, somebody would say to me “Oh, I haven’t seen you in ages, where have you been?” but the whole time I’d been working on the website and Facebook and promoting the whole thing online, but they hadn’t noticed.

Interviewer: Because they don’t have a web presence.

Stephen: Because they’re not so bothered about that. So I would feel that I was part of something that was going on and was a key part of it. Then when I’d go back, people would think that unless you’re actually boots-on-the-ground and digging in the garden, then you’re not actually part of it.  
  
It feels like the same thing is happening with London Wildlife Trust. So I tried to communicate with Ian and I very, very nicely asked him why he hadn’t retweeted me. I went about it as nicely as I could because I was aware that it would be slightly confrontational to question why he hadn’t retweeted something.  
  
But I actually could also do with his feedback so that he and I could then work together, communicate and work together on Twitter. But the reply I got was from Rachel saying “Please keep your communications to me”. He didn’t reply to me, Rachel told me to stop communicating with him, which felt really like taking my volunteering very lightly, you know.  
  
So I’ve really come to the conclusion that I’ve wondered why I’m doing the internet aspect of what I’m doing because it’s not what I want to do. I want to build – you asked me what’s in it for me?

Interviewer: Yes.

Stephen: Well the stuff I’ve said is what’s in it for me primarily because I don’t think I can really count on it building towards anything necessarily in terms of career development. It is something I can say I volunteered and I can get a reference from Rachel and I would like – in the future – to be working in heritage projects and wildlife projects, generally, whether it’s at the wetlands or elsewhere.  
  
So this is me getting into that sphere but I don’t think I should be seeing it in terms of being a career development activity or a professional development that’s definitely going to lead to a job. Because I don’t know what jobs there are going to be at the wetlands.  
  
I think that there will be a visitor’s centre receptionist and people who work in the café, people who work in the shop and then there will be volunteers doing what I’m doing.  
  
I’ve been in touch with Vestry House Museum and I’m thinking of really getting very involved with the heritage side of the wetlands. Because they’ve got a curator, but if I do a certain amount of the research before he gets going with them.  
  
Because I’ve run of photos and paintings and heritage things to tweet so I contacted my contact at Vestry House and she is an archivist and she said “Oh, we’ve got guides and have various events and photographs, that we’ve got stuff in their archive there for me to go back”, old ordinance survey maps and stuff. So I’m intending to go there.  
  
Then if I build up more of a heritage background, maybe I can work at the wetlands, working with the heritage side of it in some way. Because I don’t really want to work with children if there is going to be an educational side of it. So I don’t know.

Interviewer: So you’ve spoken about the range of benefits there and also some of the challenges of being a volunteer. I wondered if we could also talk about what you think will be the benefits to the wider community of this space opening up?

Stephen: Well that immediately occurred to me when I was there. I’ve felt and I’ve said it – it’s not that original – but I felt like this place should have been open for 50 or 100 years and it is a real- it’s an amazing place because of it and I like the dilapidation and the rust and everything.  
  
It’s like when you discover somewhere that’s been abandoned in some ways, and I like that. That’s going to change. That’s one of the things that I’m photographing and trying to see before and after, how it changes.  
  
So I like it as it is and another objective is to try and take in as much of it this year before it changes forever but I’m pro in a sort of utilitarian way? The greatest good for everybody ought to be open to the public and you know, for the local community.  
  
I often take my parents there, right? My dad is 80 and my mum is 78. So I’m quite aware of the challenges of the site for elderly. There are no benches.

Interviewer: So somewhere to sit down and catch your breath.

Stephen: Yes. Because normally, if I walk with my parents, we’d stop on a bench and then walk to the next bench and then walk to the next bench. There’s no benches.  
  
And then, at the moment, there’s a lot of very rough paths with lots of potholes and deep mud in areas and it’s quite dangerous. So the benefit to the local community, I would like it to be catering for elderly people and people with mobility issues. I’m not sure it will.  
  
One of the questions at the meeting last night at the ward meeting – high street ward – and actually half the site is in the high street ward. I actually mentioned this to Claire at the end.   
  
But somebody asked the question to Rachel “Will there be access for wheelchairs?” And her reply was to say that the surface that’s been built, the 1.7km cycle path is a very good surface for wheelchairs and that’s right. But, that route doesn’t take in the most picturesque areas.  
  
The most picturesque areas are the least accessible areas in terms of the surface to walk on. Then, as far as the local community is concerned, I know a lot of the funding for the project has come from – I don’t know how much – the cycle path, hasn’t it? Opening it up as part of the London Transport Network.

Interviewer: Yes. So all the money has come – for that cycle path – from the Mayor’s green fund, but that hasn’t contributed to anything else on the site. So that was a sort of start and finish-type thing.

Stephen: And that’s partly why it’s been done already and finished?

Interviewer: Yes, I think so.

Stephen: Walking on Walthamstow Marshes with my parents and by the canal along the Lea – I mean, you must have come across this with your research before – during the week, when people are commuting to and from work, the cyclist go very fast, very close to you without belling at all. On the weekend, you get a different sort of cyclist who is more gentile and polite.  
  
Well I can see that cycle route turning into something like the Tour de France, you know, with cyclists really getting their speed up and I would not want to be pedestrian. I would like that path to be clearly marked, one side of it for pedestrians, one side of it for cyclist, but I doubt that would happen.  
  
I’d like there to be signs all over the site saying, you know, “Be considerate”. There are signs in parks in Hackney that talk about this, about being considerate – considerate cycling. Using a bell, keeping your distance from people and not cycling very fast. And that whole site should be really considerate cycling, people not cycling so fast.  
  
But also, in due course, we’ll also get kids on the new hover boards, skateboards, every other type of board and so for the local community – I’m not really answering your question, I’m getting my pennies worth or whatever.

Interviewer: No, that’s actually my next point with this.

Stephen: Yes. What are my concern about- ?

Interviewer: Your concerns around – yes – and issues or conflict. But carry on, sorry.

Stephen: Yes, but talking about the benefit to the local community, I think it will have a benefit. It’s remarkable that, that site is- I mean, I’ve lived in Walthamstow for 15 years and only knew about going to the wetlands, you know, the last couple of years and only went there since September 2014. So I think the majority of people in Walthamstow have never been there, or rarely and it is a beautiful place.  
  
This also sounds corny or like a cliché or something, but it’s absolutely true, that I’m amazed that every time I go there, I see something new. Whether it’s a different weather condition – so the last time I went there, there was ice – and, yes.  
  
So different weather or different birds. Before being involved in the wetlands, I’d only seen a kingfisher once. I’ve seen kingfisher, the same one probably, three or four times now in the last month.

Interviewer: It’s thrilling.

Stephen: Yes. It’s [Oslam 0:36:55]?

Interviewer: Yes.

Stephen: She was saying that you’d seen a kingfisher when you’d been there as well?

Interviewer: I saw one at Woodberry.

Stephen: Oh, at Woodberry, right.

Interviewer: Yes.

Stephen: Well I can tell you where the spot is at Walthamstow. Do you know where the bird hide is? The bigger one?

Interviewer: Yes. The dilapidated- ?

Stephen: Yes. That’s open to the public.

Interviewer: Yes. The one where you’ve got [cams 0:37:19] in and things like that?

Stephen: And immediately outside it is a pylon.

Interviewer: A big pylon. Yes, I know exactly where you mean.

Stephen: If you go to the right-hand end of that, there is a window on the side of it and a window like that. Well across there is a bush, just on the other side of the water there and it’s very reliable for seeing the kingfisher landing there and diving.

Interviewer: I’ll go and have a look.

Stephen: And also, I’ve got some great footage. The cormorants are attracted. Because at certain times, I don’t know when, because I’ve asked the Thames Water people for more information about how the whole site works and Rachel asked them, we both asked them and they said they couldn’t tell us because of security concerns. Which I understand.  
  
So I don’t really know how the reservoirs work, other than to say that it’s still the Victorian gravity system and they’re not pumped, it’s just opening of sluice gates.  
  
Well at a certain point, at that point opposite there which was where the photo call was done, there is a sluice gate there and the cormorants all came down, knowing it was coming, en masse. I mean there must have been 20 of them. They came down and they shoaled all the fish up against the- and then dove and had a field day.

Interviewer: So they absolutely knew what was going on.

Stephen: They knew what was going on. Sometimes I’ve seen them come back to sort of check if it’s open and then go away.

Interviewer: You’ve got almost like some of them keeping a lookout.

Stephen: Yes. It was, yes. So it was quite something to see because it’s so many cormorants very close to you and they were just having loads and loads of fish.

Interviewer: But also that interaction between nature and man.

Stephen: And the urban sort of-

Interviewer: And the urban machinery. It’s great.

Stephen: And the understanding of their environment.

Interviewer: Yes, \_\_\_[0:39:30] sort of coexistence, a sort of co-evolution which is quite thrilling.

Stephen: Yes, which is great about the site. When I first went to the site, I can remember thinking something that I’ve heard people comment online about, which is saying “What a shame about the pylons”.  
  
Now, the first time I went there, on the open day, there was a dead swan in the water outside the copper mill, floating in the copper mill pond because it had hit one of the electric lines. So it was talked about then.  
  
Since then, the more you go, the less you notice the pylons and the more you start to love the pylons because it’s a pace you love and you feel like you have an ownership of them and I look up at the pylons to see- there’s usually birds perched in them or often there are birds perched and they attract the peregrine falcons.

Interviewer: And sparrow hawks.

Stephen: Which I’ve not seen yet, but I keep looking for them. I’ve seen cormorants up there.

Interviewer: \_\_\_[0:40:33] precarious \_\_\_.

Stephen: Yes.

Interviewer: So you’ve spoken about the benefits there and that this place that is unknown to the local community at the moment will soon be a beautiful place for them to visit.

Stephen: Yes. Although I feel like I need to treasure the last year before it gets spoiled by all the people I hate in Walthamstow, right?

Interviewer: So these are the potential disbenefits of it being open? Go on Steve.

Stephen: Yes. So if I’m in a good mood, I don’t obviously hate anyone. But there are times when you sort of don’t like the yuppification of the area. And I can see that the café at the Marine Engine House is going attract all the yummy mummies. I sort of fear it might become a place that’s… I don’t know, you just don’t know how it’ll turn out.   
  
The residents that live on the Waterside Cottages talk about young people bothering the geese and I’ve seen barbeques – you know those trays?

Interviewer: Yes.

Stephen: I’ve seen those at the wetlands. So it is already being used by people. I’ve also been at the site when one of the paths was closed because of the verges having been planted. And it was closed for another two months and the verges were all planted with grass.  
  
But I was there one Sunday and repeatedly saw people just walking around. So the sign said “This is closed” but people were just walking around. I think a lot of local people who go there regularly, take the Thames Water with a pinch of salt and you know, don’t pay their pound to get in.  
  
I’ve seen one person walking a dog on the site. As I say, I saw lots of people that day just walk around signs that were saying “Path closed” and fences that were blocking their path.  
  
So because it’s such a big site it’s difficult to police. When it’s opened up to the public and then you’ve got, you know, on the marshes last summer, we had attempted rape, a flasher. What’s the security situation going to be there?  
  
I think Linda – who was part of the friends group in that meeting – mentioned how is it going to be managed in terms of respect for the site and litter is a concern and behaviour on the site. But those are all negative things.

Interviewer: What is the plan for- or what mechanisms do you believe London Wildlife Trust will employ in order to try and affect people’s behaviour in that respect?

Stephen: I think, firstly – and I would say this as far as the effects on the local community – the environment itself has a pacifying effect on people. In a beautiful environment, people behave better. People say hello to each other when they pass each other on the marshes or at the wetlands and people do in the countryside, but they don’t on a pavement in Walthamstow Town Centre.  
  
So the area itself, the beauty of the site, will just have an effect upon people’s behaviour. Other than that, I guess a culture of people really caring about the place and developing a culture of “This is how we behave here”, there’s a word I’m…  
  
Yes, just if we can all, as a community, all agree just to behave there, I think it will have a positive effect on the area around it.

Interviewer: Yes okay. For example, why? For what reason?

Stephen: The more that people can get breathing space from Walthamstow Central, it will improve their psychology and their behaviour. It’s a safety valve, or a pressure valve or whatever. So it will just have an overall effect on the local community.  
  
And as kids are growing up, hopefully there’ll be a greater number of kids who may grow up in an inner city estate or something, but because they can go to the wetlands, they can be more inspired and, you know, grow up with a more positive outlook because they’ve got that space.  
  
I think it is interesting, again, what Linda was saying about the therapeutic aspect of it all. She works for a mental health charity and is interested in the therapy of open spaces and of nature. I think it is a therapeutic thing to do, to walk.   
  
I guess a lot of the fishermen who do it, do it for solitude, some of them and communing with nature, being at one with the wildlife – which is a sort of a break from the hubbub of urban living. And the birdwatchers have a, you know, the simplicity of animals.  
  
Well, not to be patronising to animals. I don’t want to be patronising because they’re quite complex and also they can be quite ruthless and harsh. You know, when you see a kestrel eating a mouse, you know, you’re seeing on one hand beautiful nature, but on the other hand cruel nature.

Interviewer: Yes. The inherent cruelty of nature.

Stephen: Yes. But it’s very sort of, philosophical and existential and makes you mindful being there and aware of your own mortality, I suppose.

Interviewer: On that note – not our own mortality that would be a terrible link to use as a platform for the next question, no. My next question was, I guess, around whether you think there is something specific about this being a water space and what qualities of it being a water space brings?  
  
I wondered if you could reflect on that. Because you’ve been there a lot, you’ve seen \_\_\_[0:48:02].

Stephen: Yes. Well the first thing is that you’ve got this massive sort of unseen world of what is going on underneath the water. I don’t know that much about the fish. And of course, the attraction for the fishermen is pulling out these huge fish and they pull out 30lb and 40lb fish.  
  
Some of those fish start out as little tiddlers that I’ve seen the grebes, the diving birds, catch it and having them in their mouths. So you see the birds diving and they’re in this underwater world. There is an unknown in the water that the animals share that Thames Water share – to some extent – in understanding how it works, that I don’t understand really.  
  
I mean, I’ve see part of it with the silt being dragged up and you see how much silt there was there and part of it is natural. I mean, it is not a natural environment and it is an environment that has been managed the whole time it’s been there.  
  
But there’s a misconception. One of the people who was responding to the Claire Coghill video was saying “Oh, just let wildlife do its own thing” and it was a misconception that it’s not being managed. It is, it is and it’s all a built environment in a way, with a limited amount of wilding happening.  
  
You know Solaris, the film? There is an element of that in that you have these vast spaces of water. Well it’s unusual to be, you know and all this activity that is unknown of what’s happening under the water and the number of fish that are in there are huge.  
  
I saw some figure of how many trout they put in, in a season and it was tens of thousands. I’ve forgotten how many it was now, but it surprised me, the huge number of fish that they put in there. And all the other wildlife that’s there – there’s a huge amount there.  
  
Okay, so the large space. It’s unusual to be in that large an environment, you know, unbroken up. So you have wind, the wind is quite strong there and it’s unusual to be able to see that far. There is something about- it’s almost like a trip to the seaside.  
  
  
In the summer, it does feel like – when especially you’ve got seagulls, we got gulls there – you can always see the skyscrapers in the distance but it’s very nice to be next to the water. It does have waves because of the wind blowing the water. There’s a sort of mental association of being next to water as being on vacation, you know. So it gives you a sense of that, that I’m on holiday.

Interviewer: That’s really interesting. But quite removed from – before you talked about the hubbub of everyday urban life.

Stephen: Yes. This feels like the opposite. Yes. But also it’s such a big site, I still haven’t been around every corner of it. It’s so big that you can keep going and going and discover new bits or places you haven’t been for a long time.

Interviewer: So the function of it being a discovery site is quite important?

Stephen: Yes. One thing also. Talking about the heritage and the history of it which I’m sure you know all about. I’ve discovered this through this, so that has been a great pleasure of volunteering because I’ve been looking into it.  
  
So apparently, the River Lea separate was the boundary between Daneland and Wessex. You know in Tottenham Marshes, they found a Viking barge?

Interviewer: No.

Stephen: Yes. In fact, that’s actually been turned into a public- there’s like an information board in one of these newly developed areas by the River Lea and it gives you the history of this archaeology that dug up a Viking barge.  
  
So the Vikings came up and down the Lea and the area – and I was thinking of it in terms, a little bit of psychogeography. So it’s an area of borders between London. London expanded out to the boundary of the River Lea that stopped it developing further.  
  
You have Middlesex on one side and Essex on the other side. So you got the filter beds of Middlesex and Essex. The area that the marshes are in has always been an undeveloped area – sorry, where the reservoirs are, used to be marshes – so you couldn’t build there. It was always a liminal space.  
  
Now, it’s the boundary between Haringey and Waltham Forest. It’s between the development in Tottenham Hale and the development in Black Horse Road. So it is very much a liminal space at the boundaries and so psychologically, you’ve got a sense that you’re outside of Walthamstow Central but you’re not in Hackney.  
  
People from both sides come to escape, you know, to get a bit of free mental space. Now I’m not seriously, but you know Adele had a song recently and it really doesn’t make that much sense, but she’s using the sort of metaphor of a river flowing and it’s an old sort of thing in blues music, isn’t it? She’s using that. You can say that, you know, like life flows along, or you see time flowing along as a river, that being around the river – which the reservoirs are there because the river is there – you do have a sense of the flow of life and of change.

Interviewer: Which makes me ask you now about what the impact on opening it up to a wider population, because it is open at the moment, but to a wider population. What impact do you think that will have on the sense of identity?  
  
Because you’ve spoken there about it being border lands, liminal space...

Stephen: And the fact that it’s been cut off has added to that sense of it being- so it will reduce, I think, the sense of privacy that you get there. There will be more people, but as Rachel said last night, if you go on the marshes, they’re open to the public and you’ve still got plenty of space while you’re there. At times, you don’t see anybody. At other times, you will see lots of people, it just depends when you go. So it will change like that.  
  
It will not be the same as it is now, so I really feel this is a special last year before it opens up to the public. With it being opened up to the public, will become good things like there being a café there and benches hopefully and other people and exhibitions and information about the birds.

Interviewer: So opportunities for learning?

Stephen: Yes. And I will take pleasure from seeing people take pleasure in the sights. So it won’t be as, sort of, secret a place as it is now, but it’s secret- I mean the anglers seem to have a very strong sense of ownership of it – which is very understandable – and they fear that it’s just being… I mean, you might find it interesting. Would you find it interesting if I was to copy the comments that were made by anglers to the Coghill video and another video?

Interviewer: Yes very much so.

Stephen: And you do see the odd person being very rational, saying “Well I’m looking forward to it. It’s going to be better, I think”. But the majority are very bigoted. It’s also a different culture.   
  
Partly it might be sexism, that here you had a woman, a strong female political figure with Rachel, another woman, opening, you know, whereas most of the anglers, a vast majority are men. There are one or two women but a vast majority are men.  
  
There also seems to be a cultural element to it of most of the fishermen are working class and most of them, I guess, learn it from their fathers and it’s passed down. I’ve become more attracted to the idea of doing angling the more time I’ve spent there. So it might increase the number of people taking up angling that can actually see it. Because when I first went there, I didn’t know anything about angling. I still don’t know much, but I had a real wonder about what they got out of it. But the more I’ve been there, the more I can see what the attraction might be and that I wouldn’t mind having a go at it. But I didn’t have a father who did angling who taught it to me. And so they have a very strong, sort of, I think- I admire when you see young teenage- and it’s quite surprising. You do see teenagers who are really into their carp fishing and that’s quite surprising really.

Interviewer: Yes. A remarkable commitment from an age group that typically don’t have any interest in anything.

Stephen: You don’t expect them to be attracted to something that’s so… Yes, that it would take a more mature mind to want to be that peaceful.

Interviewer: Yes.

Stephen: But they actually feel great peace from it as well. They don’t have to have age to feel the need for peace.

Interviewer: Yes. Which is something that would probably, in other ways, stereotypes and the clichés around young teenage males defies that as an expectation of what they would want to be involved in. Which gives us all the more reason to encourage them to be involved.  
  
So there we’ve spoken about the shift in identity. We’ve spoken, on a number of occasions there, about possible tensions. We spoke about tensions on the cycle route and we’ve spoken about tensions there in terms of both the birders and the fishermen having a considerable sense of ownership and protecting – effectively – their leisure time and seeing it as a space that is theirs, that they fear would be eroded and degraded because of the opening up.

Stephen: In the comments that one of them made, one of the fishermen, was saying “We the fishermen know what’s best for the wildlife”. So that was interesting. The person concerned was not brain of Britain. But it was informative because I can now make videos of the ecologists, who are working for London Wildlife Trust and the council, and answer the questions or the accusations that were put by the fishermen and say what the ecological benefits to developing this area are. Sorry.

Interviewer: And certainly when I’ve spoken to Will, the Fisheries manager, he’s made it quite clear that, you know, when you talk to the fishermen and give them the information, they do understand that actually, the quality of fishing is going to be better because-

Stephen: Yes, the quality of the water is going to be better because of the dredging, for one.

Interviewer: Exactly. So the water quality is better, there will be more juveniles because of the improved egg-laying areas.

Stephen: Really? Where will the egg-laying be?

Interviewer: So the presence of the reed beds increases the security so they’re protected from the herons and cormorants can’t get to them. So they’re going to get – I forget what the word is, there’s a word about… The fact that they don’t lose so many juveniles as they are at the moment, which means also that you will get a better variety in there as well.

Stephen: Right.

END AUDIO

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START AUDIO

Interviewer: Interview with Steve, part two. I want to pick up where we left off or at least cover the last few questions again owing to a recording failure. So the first question that I wanted us to recover is your thoughts on the impact on the user experience of this being a privately owned public space.

Stephen: So I think was I was saying last time was talking about Thames Water and how Thames Water… The fact that there is a tension between what Thames Water want and what the London Wildlife Trust want and what all the other stakeholders, the council, what they all want.  
  
That’s quite a tense situation at the moment and it feel like everybody is just starting to get used to each other and being patient with each other at the moment and tolerant. But you could probably tell that behind that tolerance, there is a certain amount of anxiety and feeling that the rangers are having to deal with an awful lot of people on their site.  
  
They’ve got this impending hundreds of thousands of people per year, or over a hundred thousand visitors a year and there’s a sense that the site is going to change for ever or that it might be ruined. The rangers have a lot to do with visiting the site, being their least concern.  
  
It feels like the rangers are probably more fishing-type people and that’s their primary consumer. Then they have the contractors coming onto the site and they’ve got a deal with lots of different contractors, plus they’ve got to deal with the water. Then they’ve got these airy-fairy wildlife people coming on and birders and the like.   
  
I can see that they might feel swamped. They certainly seem to be quite a masculine group of men, is my perception of them. Also I’ve spoken to friends in Walthamstow who have said – and this has happened several times – people who have lived in Walthamstow have almost not dared come on to the site because of the signs that Thames Water have put up on the entrance are so defying people.  
  
And actually, those signs do actually say “No public admittance”. They are misleading. I’m talking about the signs when you go – you know the ones I mean.

Interviewer: Just as you go to the-

Stephen: Yes, straight on there. It’s misleading and you only find out about the permit if you investigate.  
  
But also, I’ve got friends who are nature enthusiasts, relatively, and know about birds, but have never been there because they were scared of the, “Scared” in inverted commas, but that’s the way they put it, of the rangers, of these gruff men who might be not really very good with customer services.  
  
Once you get to know them, they are very nice, the rangers are nice. All the customer services side of it will be done by London Wildlife Trust. There will be this difference between the men who are there to keep it running as a reservoir and run the angling.  
  
There will be confusion though, won’t there? There already is. Whose responsibility for what. So you’re going to have Thames Water staff on the site being approached by somebody and having to signpost them towards the London Wildlife Trust and saying “Sorry, that’s no us” and the public are going to get under their feet and they really only want to deal with the angling and doing their job.  
  
So they’re going to have to become better at customer services and signposting to the London Wildlife Trust. It’s not going to be clear, the public are going to find it a bit confusing as to where they are and what it is, what site they are on.  
  
And you said the other day, it’s not a park it’s a nature reserve. That there is a difference there. So the public are already confused about what is the wetlands and what is the marshes. The Lea Valley Authority do the marshes and at the ward meeting last week, Rachel had to say “That’s not us actually. Coppermill Lane isn’t us. It’s Lea Valley Authority”.  
  
So there is confusion as to what is Thames Water. We know what Thames Water is, but if you didn’t know that it was a water company, you might think that because it’s got the name “Thames” of a river, you might think that it manages the canal.  
  
And then you’ve got the Lea Valley Authority and the Canal and River Trust and the council. So there is going to be a great amount of confusion over who is in charge of what and who to speak to which we, within the organisation have to face a certain amount of confusion ourselves.  
  
I was writing a blog yesterday and in it I was talking about the contracts and we decided to take out the whole section because it might be a touchy subject. Who was it that- I was trying to find a contract online of Salix?  
  
I know it’s Waltham Forest borough who are the main client for all the contracts for the contractors. But was it the councillor who was in charge or was it Rose [Jayji 0:06:42]?

Interviewer: Over identity, you’re talking about there, which I think is interesting, the identity of the site. And that’s actually-

Stephen: And the authority.

Interviewer: Yes, of who is responsible for what?

Stephen: Yes. Who is ultimately in charge? So authority, authenticity, audience, all these-

Interviewer: Sorry, yes. Okay.

Stephen: Who is in charge of what? So being on a private space. If people are in the park, they have a different sense of it’s a public space and it’s serving them. Whereas if they’re in a privately owned space, they’re more cautious.  
  
There’s a different sort of perception of the space and those who run the space have a different perception of them. The individual has a different relationship with a private company than it does with the council that it employs, that it pays for and that’s democratically elected. It’s an undemocratic organisation they’re dealing with that ultimately doesn’t have the public’s interest at heart.  
  
No matter, even if they say it’s corporate responsibility, that’s ultimately for public relations and they’re not genuinely caring about the good of the public. They are a profit making organisation, they’re not a socialist commune. I mean, that’s me being cynical about their corporate responsibility but that is my perception, is that no matter how much they might say “We care about our customers”.  
  
I mean actually, the other day when we talked about it, I was saying “Oh, do they get a tax break?” I was being cynical and you were saying “No, no. Genuinely, this is the way that-” and that’s good. That actually made me feel that, that’s a good thing. I’m glad that they genuinely have a desire to be human about it and that is good.  
  
I’d like to see them being proud of the site. That’s something we talked about the other day was how they don’t seem to have cared for the site and I was talking about the area behind the copper mill.

Interviewer: Where we were today?

Stephen: No, we were in front of the copper mill.

Interviewer: We were in front of it but yes, so the area behind.

Stephen: If you go right behind it, it’s all derelict pretty much and you think “Well, Thames Water have no cared for this at all”.

Interviewer: And that’s storage for them. That’s their storage and training area for them.

Stephen: The building itself has smashed windows. It looks derelict. Then there is also like an entrance, a security hut. There used to be security at some stage, it was totally derelict. And you feel like you’re in an abandoned space.  
  
So I guess when the public are all coming in, Thames Water won’t want it to look abandoned. I mean just like all the bridge and the Marine Engine House are all abandoned. There’s a sense of it being a ghost town, you know?

Interviewer: So that takes us on to actually one of the questions that we started talking about last time which was how you think, not that the extension of the opening of the site will affect the identity of this area.

Stephen: I think it will really, really improve the identity of this area. I think this is not an area that the central community of Walthamstow really identify with or know about. It’s an area that they travel through on the big road there and the Ferry Lane estate is Tottenham, it’s not Walthamstow.  
  
The Walthamstow community, sort of Walthamstow Central, Black Horse Lane and St. James’ Street, all identify with Walthamstow Marshes because you access it via Coppermill Lane out of that part of the town. They will come in that way.  
  
But this end of town, I never used to come here and the only reason I’ve ever come here is for the wetlands and the Ferry Boat Inn. The previous time I’d been here was when I cycled, years ago, up the canals and gone out to Broxbourne or I’d gone out to Broxbourne on the train, cycle back and come to the Ferry Boat Inn.  
  
So the way into the Ferry Boat Inn was via the canals, because of the canals only. So with the wetlands being prestigious and being sleekly presented and having the coffee shop and the history and heritage, the property values and everything is all going to go up in the area, I would think.  
  
You’ll probably have the estate agents calling it “Wetlands Village” or something in the area. But also, I’ve heard that Tottenham Hale area had gone up because people who couldn’t afford to buy in Walthamstow were buying in Tottenham Hale. A newer middle class coming in and students living in that area.  
  
So I’ve heard that a few years ago and I think it’s already the case that Tottenham Hale has come up. And Tottenham has been regenerated since the riots and the like. So as far as Walthamstow is concerned, this is Black Horse.  
  
Black Horse has been re-developed and it’s got this new identity of being a place of craftsman- you know that sign at the crossroads? And this is just down the road from there. At the ward meeting the other day, there was a presentation by Willowfield School that’s just there. Do you know where it is?

Interviewer: Yes I do because I walked past it.

Stephen: That big blue building that you can see from the reservoirs. They’re right there by the reservoirs and you can see all the reservoirs from their rooms. It’s a brand new school. There’s a sense of renewal in the area and regeneration. So the council building on the Black Horse estate, I think it’s just going to have a really positive effect.

Interviewer: That’s great. Let’s see. Done those.  
  
Yes. The bit that I was concerned that we lost was around what you were talking about in terms of whether or not this being a water based-site, if there is anything specific or unique about this being a water-based site.

Stephen: Okay.

Interviewer: That affects how you perceive it or value it?

Stephen: Yes. Well, for me personally, something I thought of after we talked was that I’d referred to the reservoirs as “The lakes”. Now when I was a kid, my parents took me to the lakes and I had friends of the family who had a caravan in the lakes and have great \_\_\_[0:15:05] since and a lot of people have a positive attitude towards the Lake District and a sense of freedom when in an environment like there is around reservoirs one and that first path we go on there.  
  
I feel like it reminds me of the Lake District there. The islands there. And that’s a personal thing from my childhood, but a lot of people will feel the same, that it connects them.  
  
So referring to them as reservoirs. Like East Warwick and other concrete-sided are clearly reservoirs, but the older, the first, reservoirs one, two and three, look like lakes. So you have a sense of being in the countryside. And a different feeling about it, if you can it a lake than a reservoir.  
  
I mentioned before about Adele’s single about the River Lea and the idea of water being flowing, a river flowing and time flowing and life flowing along. I think that there is that sense that the wetlands are part of the Lea Valley and the water continues on down through the marshes and it’s not just in the middle of nowhere.

Interviewer: Yes. So that connectivity to its wider identity with in the Lea Valley is quite interesting.

Stephen: I think it’s quite important to stress as far as the interpretation of the site is concerned, I’m sure that Steven [Swabi 0:16:58] will emphasise the connection with the River Lea and the canal.  
  
For me, when the tour of the site is done, and I think part of the problem is that Thames Water haven’t really explained fully, how it all works. They’ve just said that it’s a Victorian system that works on gravity, but I don’t know where the River Lea comes in. I don’t quite know.  
  
I know that Lockwood feeds in to the copper mill stream. So there’s an element of mystery about the whole site, how it all works. You know that painting that I was pointing out to you? Well do you know where the actual course of the old River Lea is?

Interviewer: Around here?

Stephen: Yes. Well just over there by those blue \_\_\_[0:17:50] netting right? There’s a bridge. And if you look down, and on the car-park, it’s next to it. That’s the course of the old River Lea, right?  
  
And the old River Lea is spelled L-E-A, right? And have you come across this spelling discrepancy on signs and the like?

Interviewer: Yes.

Stephen: And do you know why it is?

Interviewer: No, I didn’t actually.

Stephen: L-E-A is actually the natural geographical course and the valley. But at some point, I think it was 15th century there was legislation to change the course of the River Lea and to build a canal. And the canal work started much earlier than- you know, most canals in the 18th century or 19th century.  
  
But this was actually, I think, 1500s or 1400s. Anyway, and it was instituted into law as River L-E-E and therefore-

Interviewer: Oh I see, it was a legislative typo effectively.

Stephen: Yes. As the way they used to spell things differently all the time. And so because it was put into the statutes as L-E-E, that all future man-made navigations of the river are spelled L-E-E and that continues to this day.  
  
And so you’ve got signs on the marshes that spell it two different ways on the same side.

Interviewer: Yes. And of course “Love The Lea” is L-E-A.

Stephen: Yes. Which is the valley and the original and the Lea navigation. Any man-made thing is double E.

Interviewer: So it has a bit of a split identity anyway?

Stephen: Yes. Well it’s physically split. There’s lots of tributaries around here and that is quite a multi-faceted identity of it that you’ve got the River Lea, you’ve got the Copper Mill stream which was a man-made diversion of the River Lea.  
  
Because there were marshes, they couldn’t build a copper mill on the marshland. It would have to be drained. So they diverted the copper mill to where they could build a copper mill.  
  
Then you’ve got the River L-E-A and then the navigation and then you’ve got other things like the Dagenham Brook and you’ve got the flood relief channel as well. And if you look at a map, it’s quite something to work out and a bit of a puzzle and a mystery and I enjoy that sort of element of it, of learning how it all fits together.  
  
There’s an esoteric element of it of people who know this and that and the other, whereas other people who don’t and learning all about it is intriguing. So if I was bringing friends here, I would start the tour over at the Lea navigation so that they could see that the wetlands is related to the river.

Interviewer: So it’s the context thing. You quite value the context.

Stephen: The context, yes. I like the context. I’ve never been up to Tottenham Marshes, but I like the context.  
  
I was saying to Sylvia today, we’re going to go on a day out around the marshes and down to the waterworks centre and the old filter beds. Because you can’t understand the wetlands without the context of it and that’s part of the puzzle, the jigsaw puzzle.

Interviewer: And also why they were needed.

Stephen: Yes. Why they were here, because at that time, this was countryside and this was pure water outside of the city.

Interviewer: And London had a cholera outbreak.

Stephen: Exactly.

Interviewer: Yes.

Stephen: Yes.

Interviewer: So it’s interesting that it was developed as a point of public safety and it’s now its issue around health and safety and public safety that continues to frame how it can be used?

Stephen: Yes. Yes.

Interviewer: So it was born out of that?

Stephen: You know, it’s for public health in that walking around it.

Interviewer: In walking and exercising, mental wellbeing.

Stephen: Yes. So it is sort of a spa-type place in a way. I’ve come across the fact that people swim here and an old lady at the ward meeting said “We used to go swimming” and then I’ve seen photographs on the Facebook page for the anglers and it’s showing young people, yes, diving in, in the summer.   
  
So there’s an element of that being exercise and health. It’s a shame, obviously it’s a nature reserve so you can’t do that really and there will be problems with people wanting to do that as they’ve always done, I suppose.  
  
But also, I suppose there’s a danger element of it, because people have always drowned in the River Lea. In fact, this pub, there is a history on the wall there, right? There was a local lady – I’ve forgotten her name, Katie Richards or something like that – Katie, and she made a video on YouTube that is sat in here giving the history of this pub.  
  
She went down to the cellar in the basement. She was saying that in the 18th century, when there was an economic downturn, there were a lot of people that committed suicide by jumping into the River Lea and they were brought in to here and stored in the cellar as a morgue. So this was a registered morgue at that time.

Interviewer: That’s interesting. Because I was talking to one of the bailiffs and he was saying that back in the ‘70s when he was involved in the care of it, the management of it actually that they dealt with some, on a regular basis, suicides in the northern reservoirs.

Stephen: Oh, right. Sorry, when?

Interviewer: Back in the ‘70s.

Stephen: Oh, right.

Interviewer: As recently as the ‘70s and he’d come across several bodies. They’d found notes and things like that where what happens is they know that if they jump off the rest of those top res, they will get sucked into the piping because the current is so strong and that’s…

Stephen: Really?

Interviewer: Yes.

Stephen: So they would commit suicide by jumping into the reservoirs, East Warwick and West Warwick?

Interviewer: Yes. The ones with the strong currents, with the piping \_\_\_[0:24:25].

Stephen: Wow.

Interviewer: Yes. Which is pretty grim.

Stephen: I don’t know anything about that. I’d like to learn about that. And there are always people dying – it seems. Just this last year, you know there was the kid who ran away from the police in Clapton and jumped into the water and died?

Interviewer: Oh, I didn’t know that. \_\_\_ say that. Apparently, I understand that one of the people that was going to be able to give evidence against the \_\_\_[0:24:53] case.

Stephen: Which case?

Interviewer: The \_\_\_ case.

Stephen: Oh yes, yes.

Interviewer: He was found in I think, one part of the tributaries around here.

Stephen: Well he might be the same person but I didn’t realise that.

Interviewer: Yes, yes.

Stephen: There was somebody. The police came to his house, he climbed out of the window, ran down to the Lea, jumped in and drowned trying to swim across. There’s a little shrine by the far end, by the latent Lea Bridge Road. It might be the same person.

Interviewer: It might be the same person.

Stephen: I think there’s been two cases within the last year of people drowning in there. And then, do you know in Postman’s Park in Central London, there are tiles on the wall that commemorate people who’ve given their life to save another person – this is a bit of a random fact.  
  
So there is this hut that has all these tiles and all these people who have sacrificed their own life to save someone else, right? One of them is someone who dived into the Lea to save someone else in the 18th century. So it’s always been hazardous. I think any river always is hazardous and there’s hazards all sort of tied in with the whole place.  
  
I mean, I worry when I’m filming, that I might step backwards and I’ve had health and safety training in order to be able to do the tours. We have a health and safety representative on each tour. In fact, I met Richard, the trustee that you met today.

Interviewer: Oh, you said, yes.

Stephen: We were both on the first-aid course. Yes, so it’s first-aid training, not health and safety training.

Interviewer: It is that question of hazard, isn’t it?

Stephen: Yes.

Interviewer: And the hazards on the signing as well and…

Stephen: Yes. Well, if anything, they’ve overstated it a bit because there’s so much of that, sort of messages, that people have stayed away a lot, too much.  
  
But also there is new fencing up here by the copper mill stream that’s very meshed and very, very safe. That’s quite noticeable. In fact, it might be a bit of a problem because people might say “Well, it kind of ruins the view. I have to go right up to see over to the barrier”.

Interviewer: Yes. That’s potentially a tension.

Stephen: It’s another barrier. Yes, it’s the tension between health and safety and aesthetics.

Interviewer: Well let’s talk about it now. So health and safety and aesthetics. Before we started recording, you wanted to talk more about that?

Stephen: Yes. Well, when we were talking last time, on the Coppermill Road, you’ll see it tomorrow. When you first go leave Coppermill Lane and go on to the sort of bit where you’ve got reservoir number five on your right, you have a concrete fence there that you’d have to go up to it to put your face between to see through.  
  
So it’s not built for looking through. Quite the opposite. So barriers for people engaging with it.  
  
I mean, this road down here and the traffic on it is a barrier to the whole site and divides the site. And in the consultation video, it was talking about Muslim people needing somewhere to do their ablutions. Which is ironic since they’re in a whole water \_\_\_[0:28:37] or at least it should be possible.  
  
The whole question of ablutions and purification, you know, I thought about afterwards. I’m not religious at all, but I was brought up Catholic and there was a hell of a lot about the Lake Galilee and walking on water and [fissuring 0:28:59] of men.  
  
There’s a lot of religious connotations attached with water and purity and washing, I suppose, but also fishing in Christianity. And they used to fish here using seine nets, which is where you’ve got nets that have buoys on the top.

Interviewer: How do you spell that?

Stephen: Oh, like the River Seine.

Interviewer: Oh.

Stephen: And there are illustrations of them fishing like that in the 19th century here.

Interviewer: Yes.

Stephen: Which is much like the Christian imagine of-

Interviewer: Throwing the net out into, yes.

Stephen: Yes, I’m going off the topic, but there’s a big thing of the mystery of the site we talked about and this might be on the previous answer to a different question but what lies beneath? What’s going on under the surface?  
  
But there are lots of mysteries about this site, partly because of Thames Water not telling us, but also, I mean, on this side, there’s so many things. If you don’t know why birds do things, I don’t know how much – even if you were an expert on birds – there’s a limit to how much they can understand of why a bird does something.   
  
They explain things in quite broad terms, like saying “Oh, well that’s a bonding activity” just generally because you can’t know what’s in the mind of a bird. So there’s a mystery there. Why do the Canada geese all suddenly act all as one?  
  
You know, on this area, there’s an electricity sort of-

Interviewer: The box type area?

Stephen: Yes, that makes a buzzing sound.

Interviewer: Yes, yes, yes.

Stephen: What is that? And you sort of feel like it’s alien. It’s a very, very industrial spot, that. Some sort of electricity generator extraordinaire and it’s all got razor wire on the outside of it all and, you know, barbed wired.  
  
So there’s lots of areas of the site that you just wonder “What is this? There is a mystery about it. Which of these things are currently used?” The pumps and sluice gates. “Which of them are used, which aren’t used?” Even Matthew Frith today, when we’d all looked down into that dungeon, you know what I mean?

Interviewer: Yes I know. So I thought he was going to talk there then he didn’t.

Stephen: Yes. He came over to Rachel and said “What’s this called?” she didn’t know and I said “I call it the dungeon” and so I’ve got my own nicknames for places around the site.  
  
There’s another place that’s a weir, going just up here between low maynard and the copper mill. You’ll see in the summer, a lot of birds, because the water runs over it quite shallow, they wash there. Loads of birds all washing there, so I call it “The Birdbath”.  
  
So people will nickname the place and rename the place themselves.

Interviewer: It’s almost like an anthropomorphising… Isn’t it?

Stephen: I suppose, yes. So that green sort of- what that is and how safe it is, it looks pretty unsafe, doesn’t it? It obviously is gates between the copper mill and the reservoir but it looks very dangerous but it also looks great. It’s so gothic.

Interviewer: Yes. Do you think that- ?

Stephen: I’m not really talking about the barriers. Okay, so barriers – these are notes that I made – okay. Concrete fence.  
  
Well for me, there’s a barrier in that London Wildlife Trust do not have an office here yet. This is something that Rachel feels herself. She would like to be based here, but due to costs I would guess, she’s based in Woodberry Wetlands.  
  
It feels like the tail wagging the dog. This is the massive project here, yet the office is somewhere else.   
  
I feel it’s a bit of a barrier for me because it’s difficult to get to and it’s not in an area that’s easy accessible or that I have any other experience of going there. It’s not familiar to me and I don’t feel any great attachment to going there.  
  
So I was there yesterday and I don’t like going there because it’s an inconvenient place for me to get to so it’s a barrier in that way. If they had an office here or a porta-cabin or somewhere in the copper mill. It seems silly to be having community engagement meetings for the Waltham Forest community, in Hackney.  
  
But Rachel knows that and she’s itching to be based here. But also, she doesn’t work five days a week, she’s only working three days a week, so that feels like a barrier to me. Because I’m volunteering still the other four days of the week and I’m waiting for her to come back on Monday to catch up with what I’d done.  
  
So if I’m tweeting when she’s not there, she doesn’t retweet until she gets back to work. Or if I send her an e-mail, it takes four days to get back to me, so that’s a barrier. In terms of the time that they are giving over to it, that she should be working five days. I’d like her to be working five days a week. I’d like her to be- more Rachel-time, nearer to me, more time, you know.  
  
Also, there was a slight feeling that they’ve got their own culture there or their own sort of group at Woodberry Wetlands and they’ve somehow come over here. Like David Mooney is based there. I don’t know where he lives but he’s been there for donkey’s years. Donkey’s years they’ve been there.  
  
And it’s their own place. I think they’ve been there for donkey’s years, whereas this is-

Interviewer: This is new to them.

Stephen: They don’t own it as much. There was a feeling, especially with Penny, you know Penny [Dixie 0:36:06]? Well there are lots of Walthamstow photographers who specialise in photographing the marshes. And I actually sent Rachel – and I checked it was okay with Rachel – I said “Is this going to upset Penny if I send her this?”  
  
Because I wasn’t sure what Penny’s role was. Initially, I thought Penny’s role might be to interact and actually community engage with the local photographers. But her role actually just seems to be as a photographer.  
  
So I sent her a list of all the people who had done projects – photography projects – over the years and artists on the marshes who were Walthamstow-based people. So why are London Wildlife Trust using this woman from another project, who is not a local, not part of the local community?  
  
It was easy for them and she’s already involved with London Wildlife Trust, but she’s not a Walthamstow person, she’s a Stoke Newington person and there are plenty of other people who’d jump at the chance if they were engaged with and who are already working and it would connect with the work they’ve already done on the Lea and Walthamstow Marshes.  
  
Then you’ve got the fact that London Wildlife Trust is based in Westminster. Their head office is in Westminster and that head office feels a long way away from Walthamstow. I’d rather than London Wildlife Trust had a much stronger presence in Walthamstow or that the organisation that was taking over running it was a Walthamstow or a Waltham Forest organisation, like Forest Recycling project or something that had a longer history in Walthamstow, Waltham Forest.  
  
That’s sort of, you know, being very parochial or something, isn’t it? Because we’re in London, it’s a regional project. It’s actually a national project and an international project, so there is no reason to be that local about it.  
  
But I’m a little bit- I’m a local people- this is a local shop, you know, from The League of Gentlemen.

Interviewer: I get that. That’s how you feel about it in terms of its identity in that regard.

Stephen: Yes. So that will wear off as they engage with more people in Walthamstow. It’s just early days and they went for the lower hanging fruit.

Interviewer: What about barrier to other people getting involved? So what about barriers to- you spoke-

Stephen: There’s one barrier. Well, this is in my area of – sorry, I’ve interrupted you, you were going to say – is the whole social media thing. Now that, I would say…  
  
As we’ve said before, London Wildlife Trust are not a very media-friendly organisation in terms of, you know, the people who work for them tend to be of a culture that’s not terribly bothered about social media. That’s my perception of it. They are people who like to be outdoors, who like to get their fingers dirty in the earth and are not terribly bothered about Facebook or Twitter.   
  
So I’m doing Twitter and there was a barrier to me doing the Twitter. As I was saying before, I knew somebody who was running the Vestry House Twitter and they handed it over to her so she could do it 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and that’s what you need to do with Twitter.  
  
So they wouldn’t let me do that for them, so I had to set up my own account. They then, don’t guarantee me at all, that they- I mean Rachel will retweet me, but Ian who is the comms man, Ian [Totelove 0:40:43] who is the comms man at the head office who I’ve never met, he will give me no guarantee that he will retweet something for me.

Interviewer: So do you think that, that is partly a platform, partly a medium of communication that if it’s not fully engaged in, there is a section of the community that wouldn’t know about the wetlands or feel connected to it?

Stephen: So we’re doing Twitter. Rachel is doing Facebook and every time I meet her, I try and get myself to be allowed to do Facebook because Facebook is much bigger than Twitter, as you probably know as a marketing person, and it is very, very active for Walthamstow. There are large Walthamstow group.  
  
Then there are other Walthamstow groups that are to do with the marshes or to do with Leyton Marshes, but there is Walthamstow Life and very large groups where they have these massive heated debates – really heated debates – a about mini-Holland.  
  
So there’s a good reason to be very cautious about it and Rachel is right to be cautious about it. But Rachel is also, I feel, overcautious. But she might be right.  
  
How do I know what would happen if I were to start going on those groups and putting my videos on there. You saw what happened on the reservoirs group of the anglers in response to what was a fairly innocuous video.

Interviewer: Hardly controversial, yes.

Stephen: Yes. So what would happen if I went onto Walthamstow Life where they love to have huge debates about nothing, about mini-Holland? So perhaps she’s absolutely right, but the result is that there are people who had never touched Twitter who use Facebook quite a bit and they aren’t getting any information.  
  
Like the guy who went down to the wetlands and filmed the pump coming out and said on his video, on YouTube, that this is sewage and then didn’t got back and correct himself at all. He is very active on Facebook and he hadn’t at all got my message that I’m putting out about what that is, on Twitter.  
  
So I feel there is a large community and you would think that community engagement involved in this day and age, somebody being social-media savvy. And Rachel has said to me “I’m not a social media person”. There’s a difference there.  
  
To some extent, what I’ve learned about community engagement is that it’s the art of choosing who to be engaged with, when to be engaged and to be disengaged with people most of the time. Or a lot of time when it’s crucial. That’s perhaps the clever way of doing it.  
  
But there seems to be lip service being paid to Facebook. So when she’s going to the ward meeting, she says “We’ve got a Facebook page, we’ve got a Twitter page” but actually, she’s not doing it properly, she’s just paying lip service. I’m doing my Twitter thing a lot and it’s exhausting and I’m doing two or three hours a day on it and it’s too much and I’d quite like to stop.  
  
So I can understand why, but-

Interviewer: Whether she’s got limited time or if she-

Stephen: She can’t do that. You need somebody specifically to do that roll.

Interviewer: Dedicated.

Stephen: If the funding was there was London Wildlife Trust to actually do it like a professional company would do it and actually have a social media person.

Interviewer: I suppose that’s the challenge, isn’t it, with these projects?

Stephen: Yes.

Interviewer: We spoke about risks. One of the last questions I had was risks of it opening up and I think Matthew spoke about it a little bit today \_\_\_[0:44:07] walk and it was evident in the various comments and the birding walk this morning. I wondered if you could talk about how you felt.

Stephen: Well, I was going to repeat what Pete Lambert said and Terry also said the same thing. The more people you have, then the traffic – as they call it – will drive rare birds away. So if there’s a little rare bird that isn’t out in the middle of the lake, it’s right by the side of the lake and you have more people walking around, then the bird will not stay around.  
  
So you’ll have a birder who’s got something in their scope and it’s being driven away because you’ve got people of all different sorts making noise, not blithely unaware of it, having a nice time. But especially children. The site is quite nice for adults now because there’s not biddy under eight allowed and that’s going to change the culture of the place from being an adult’s place to being a family.   
  
And when we advertise these things now, we do have the tours, somebody did reply on Twitter saying “No children?” Question mark, question mark, question mark and I had to say to them “Well, it’s not safe because the site is being developed”. But that’s a bit of an excuse at the moment.  
  
So there’s a tension there between families and individuals, you know, adult individuals. I’ve already detected that from birders I’ve met who don’t want it to become a zoo and they don’t want it to become like Barnes. But what Matthew was saying was how that there’s a honeypot thing and actually all the kids will stay within ten minutes of the central bit and won’t go out to the outer edges.

Interviewer: Were there other risks that you wanted to cover?

Stephen: Other risks?

Interviewer: Actually no, I think we did cover that. The sustainability point, I think, was my last question. We \_\_\_.

Stephen: How sustainable is it? As far as barriers – sorry talking about barriers – to volunteering. So there’s been a lack of funding, I think, for London Wildlife Trust in that Rachel is there on her own and they might know better than I do and they might say “Well this is very early days, we don’t need to have a volunteer co-ordinator and a project manager”.  
  
I think that there is a project manager from London Wildlife Trust coming soon?

Interviewer: Yes.

Stephen: And has that person been appointed?

Interviewer: I don’t know.

Stephen: No. And Rachel is aware of this. She said at our meeting yesterday, she said “We’ve never talked about expenses. We’ve never talked about-” so I know, because I’ve managed volunteers myself working in charities, I know what volunteer best practise is, that you sit down and you do a volunteer agreement and you decide when you’re going to assess how it’s going, what goals they want to get out of it.  
  
Well none of this has been done with me and I’ve been asked to sort of just go along because we don’t have time for it and I’ve never had any expenses paid. So there’s going to come a time in the next couple of months where they’re going to hopefully catch up on that. That’s what the promise is. But it’s a bit of a barrier that.   
  
I mean also, I’m not sure what happened. You might be able to flesh this out, but last year, last June, there was an advert put out for an intern. Three days a week, intern, community engagement intern, right? And this was advertised widely.  
  
I’ve not asked, but there’s no reason why, it’s just I’ve never really found the time to just ask, is that Ella? I don’t think it is Ella. So was nobody appointed for that?  
  
What the response there was at the time by somebody that you’ll meet tomorrow. Do you know Fabian? Or Fabien? Have you come across him? I mean, you may not meet him tomorrow, but he said he’s a prominent tweeter.

Interviewer: Oh, no, no, no. I know about him because you told me about him.

Stephen: Strawbridge [Hove 0:48:49].

Interviewer: Yes, you told me about him.

Stephen: And he lives in the Waterside cottages. Well his comment was that if you make an internship, three days a week, unpaid, the only people you’ll attract is people who can afford and they’ll be white middle-class typically. Which is a fair point.  
  
So that’s a barrier to involvement and to volunteering is are they going to pay people’s expenses, are they going to pay people? That is a concern for a lot of people.  
  
One of the women who came along today from Croydon said she would like to get a job here as a warden. But I couldn’t tell her whether there are going to be jobs for wardens. I said “I think there’s going to be a lot of volunteers” so you can only volunteer if you can afford to volunteer.  
  
And it undermines people who are trying to get paid for their role if you’ve got other people who are going to do it for free. You have this whole big society rubbish from the Conservative Government. And it changes the whole thing if people are not being paid.  
  
So I’m doing it for free and Peter Lambert said to me today “So you’re still doing this for free?” and it made me think “Yes. Yes, I am”. I’m quite happy to do it for free, but when people say to me “You’re still doing this for free?” it makes me think “Well, maybe I’m a fool for doing it for free” but I’m happy to do it and it suits me and I can do it.  
  
Most of Walthamstow wouldn’t be able to afford to do it. That’s a major barrier. Most of Walthamstow will not be able to afford to volunteer here for free.  
  
In terms of the poorest, which is the majority. No matter how middle class Walthamstow is getting and gentrified, the actual majority of people are working class and actually, Pakistani. And unless there is going to be a major engagement with them, which they need to be paid to do.

Interviewer: Can we move on to the questions around sustainability because I think you had something to say there about what my question was, whether or not you think this space being opened and the experience and the use of it will affect people’s relationship with water in terms of questions whether or not it will make a more sustainable relationship with water.

Stephen: Yes. Well I thought about it afterwards and I thought, of course it’s something you know more about, is that I’ve come across the idea of seeing the world economy in terms of water. I came across this some years ago and I don’t fully understand it, but instead of talking about industry or travel as being expenditure in terms of pounds or oil, you can actually measure it in water.  
  
Because each of these things use a certain amount of water and to create water, you need a certain amount of these other resources. So maybe this will lead people to value water more.

Interviewer: You mean in terms of the interpretation that they have or just the actual physical experience of going to the site \_\_\_[0:52:49] site.

Stephen: Yes.

Interviewer: The latter?

Stephen: The latter. Yes. But the loving the place and loving the fact that it is in Walthamstow and it is local, will make people appreciate the whole water system.  
  
Because I didn’t realise that most of London’s water comes from here and when you turn on the tap, you don’t think “Oh, I’m getting Walthamstow water”. It still seems incredible and I don’t know how it works. Again, there’s this is mystery about the whole place.  
  
So how sustainable?

Interviewer: I like that point about local water.

Stephen: Yes, I mean if it’s somewhere that you love being, then you sort of love the water as much. I don’t know. It may lead people to take it for granted, you know, if they don’t realise how special it is here and how unusual it is.  
  
Societies around the world are all based – historically – were based around rivers and cities all start around rivers. So living in a situation where you’ve got water is so essential to where you live, that we’ve become, in the modern world, detached from the natural resources that we need to sustain a living.  
  
So this reconnects you with something that, you know, if you’re living on the Amazon or you’re living on any river in any part of the world, it’s very clear, very obvious. Whereas you can live in Walthamstow without being connected with all of that. If this massive site wasn’t there, if you lived in loads of other areas of London, you wouldn’t be so reminded of it.

Interviewer: And interesting, yes.

Stephen: Of something that’s much more obvious, if you live by the seaside and you look out and you see- or you live in a fishing town or a fishing village where everybody goes out on trawlers.

Interviewer: That’s really nice.

Stephen: Or wherever you live by the coast. It’s much more obvious, the importance of the water. Whereas in these urban areas, water just seems to come out of a tap or be rain, you know.

Interviewer: Yes. I think that’s really essential.

Stephen: I was talking before about being beside the seaside and the cultural associations. I’m just checking through this, these were the notes I made before.

Interviewer: Yes, no problem.

Stephen: Last time we were talking about a peace that comes with fishing and then that made me think afterwards “Well, of course that’s a religious sort of idea, isn’t it?”   
  
Of course, I come from a completely atheist perspective, but somebody who is Christian, especially if they’re evangelical Christian and there’s quite a lot of those sorts of Baptist religions in East London. It’s much more obviously if you’re being, you know, adult baptism in a swimming pool or will people want to be baptised in the reservoirs?  
  
You know, that whole element of water being-

Interviewer: Central to your religious experience.

Stephen: Yes. Water being a religious thing.

Interviewer: The religiosity of it.

Stephen: Yes, of baptism. To me, it is not there at all. I don’t think of it in those terms but-

Interviewer: But it might be for some others.

Stephen: When I first moved to Waltham – and this is absolutely still the case – I suddenly felt I was on the front line of religion. Because the town square constantly has different religious group proselytising in all different ways.  
  
You either have the local Potter’s House evangelical group rapping. They come along and do rap with loudspeakers all about Jesus. You have people handing out messages, all sorts of Jehovah’s Witnesses and of course you’ve got Muslims. Whereas I came from suburbs where religion was not in the public sphere at all, religion is very prominent in Walthamstow, in the public spaces.

Interviewer: Yes, “And here’s a public space…”

Stephen: Here’s a public space that’s got all this water here, how is it going to play out. So in the consultation video, there were guys saying there’s got to be some sort of “Faith space” here. Which to me, seems completely alien, the concept that you have a- of course you’ve got to have a faith space in reservoirs.  
  
I can understand the practicality of it if you have to pray five times a day, but other than that, I don’t see the point in it. But if you’ve got one religion, you have to have a multi-faith space. Anyway…  
  
[Pause in conversation 0:58:47 – 0:59:05]  
  
Well, the weather. Talking about sustainability and we’ve had this warm winter which has been because of global warming and we’ve increased global warming. So I think I said this before but I don’t know if it was recorded, just that you become much more conscious of the weather at Walthamstow wetlands.  
  
You become much more conscious of the sun. Even on a day like today when it’s cold, the sun is reflected in the water and you can see the reflection, it’s really great, isn’t it? I love the reflection of the sun and the reflection on large areas of water with it shimmering away as the water moves.   
  
But also the wind. You become aware of the wind over the large expanses and that can be chilling, but also you start to get waves in the water.  
  
So I’ve taken some great photographs where, in reality, you couldn’t look at the sun, but the photograph can capture both the reflection and the video can- so I’ve really enjoyed that “Reflections” element of it.  
  
But also, as I’ve said, ice we had a couple of weeks ago, the fog back in November. You become much more aware of the weather and the weather is all affected by sustainability of, you know, everything we’re doing with fossil fuels and the climate change.

Interviewer: So it brings the climate change debate to the \_\_\_[1:00:45] very much the front of line, just by the weather being front and forward in your experience.

Stephen: Yes.

Interviewer: Whereas actually-

Stephen: The water makes the weather more…

Interviewer: Prominent.

Stephen: Prominent. And the behaviour of the animals make the weather more prominent. Like the animals being there or not being there depending on what the weather is like.  
  
Peter was talking about that, with the birds, today. He said some birds weren’t around because it had been a warm winter and they actually like the cold weather. When you’re there, sometimes the birds will be on the warm side of the island. So where you have to be to see the birds depends on which is the warmer side, or the lee side or the windward side of the island.  
  
So the behaviour of the animals makes you more aware of the weather and in the summer, you get loads of damselflies and dragonflies and suddenly, you are much more aware of the insects. And of course all the trees blooming and in the winter them all losing their leaves and in the summer it all becomes green again.  
  
It’s very simple what I’m saying.

Interviewer: So as well as being-

Stephen: The whole look of the whole place transforms according to the weather.

Interviewer: And therefore makes you much more aware of the seasons.

Stephen: Yes. It does, definitely. And more aware that this has been a warm winter and more aware of nature generally and of animals. I’m looking forward to the summer more than I was a few years ago when I didn’t have the wetlands to look forward to see the animals at.  
  
But also this is the first winter- I was here last summer but I wasn’t here last winter. So this is the first winter where I’ve stuck around to come when the weather is- but it’s absolutely worth it because you still see lots of birds around that over-winter here.  
  
My perception of it would have been that there would have been less to see during the winter. In some ways there is and the site changes and the wind whips up. But I have been here, also, when it was icy but there was no wind.

Interviewer: Eerie.

Stephen: Yes. And it was lovely sun, so you actually got the heat. It was perfectly nice weather. It was cold but it wasn’t windy so we weren’t chilled. The wind is a big deal, I think.   
  
[Pause in conversation 1:03:38 – 1:04:00]  
  
We’re talking about sustainability and, well, I’m not sure how this is connected but of course, one thing I have noticed, right, just in learning about the history and the heritage of the Lea, is the connection with industry. So the copper mill, was an industrial building producing coins. Before that, it was a leather mill, it was a wheat mill it was…

Interviewer: Yes. \_\_\_[1:04:29].

Stephen: Yes. It’s made so many different things and this was all powered by the energy of the water. Then, down at the Middlesex filter beds, you know on that island where the nature reserve is?

Interviewer: Yes.

Stephen: There was a factory making nails.

Interviewer: Yes.

Stephen: A mill making nails. So the connection between industry and the power of the water connects back with that thing that I was saying before about how you can measure sustainability by water in a different way.  
  
It’s more direct, you didn’t have the oil in the middle of it. And all along the Lea, you have these industrial estates. So cheek by jowl with the river and the canal, you’ve got quite ugly former industrial estates that have no become derelict, some of them.   
  
Some of them then being redeveloped into properly now because it’s not profitable, the industry isn’t in this country anymore. So all along the Lea Valley, you’ve got these industrial estates on both sides of the Lea and they’re both now being developed into property.  
  
So I think that’s an interesting connection between industry and the River Lea with coal being moved down the river and all sorts of things being moved down the river – gunpowder. Gunpowder was milled here as well.

Interviewer: Yes, I know.

Stephen: Okay. Yes, the other thing I was just going to say, barriers to being involved. I’m also not being allowed by London Wildlife Trust to have control over their wetlands blog.  
  
Rachel has control of it. To edit it, I have to go to her, for her to log it in and it’s not at all trusting of me as a volunteer. But at the same time, it’s actually quite prudent. I understand why the safety and security is there, but it makes it-  
  
Tomorrow- I wrote a blog entry yesterday and because Rachel had to leave the office, I didn’t have time to spend the last 20 minutes on this blog entry, right, on the Walthamstow Wetlands website. So I need to spend another 20 minutes or half an hour on it editing it. So I have to go back to Woodberry wetlands tomorrow to do a blog entry with Rachel in the office.  
  
Previously, I’ve been sat with Rachel doing the blog and I’m saying “Click on that, click on that”. So London Wildlife Trust needs to develop an ability to manage volunteers who aren’t just digging and making fences. Because otherwise, it’s off-putting. It’s very off-putting.  
  
I’ve had to bite my tongue. I’m glad I’ve got somebody to talk to about it but it doesn’t make me feel happy about. But it’s not Rachel’s fault at all.

Interviewer: No, it’s the controls around them and the fact that they’re not really set up.

Stephen: It’s not Rachel’s fault at all.

Interviewer: They’re not really set up and they’re not set up to do that, and that is a no-no.

Stephen: No. Well, because Ian – I’ve never met Ian – he’s in Westminster. But also because of the partnership with all the different organisations, if we’re going to put anything out there.   
  
And again, I understand that. It has to be passed by the Thames Water comms team, the London Wildlife Trust comms team, the Waltham Forest Borough comms team. That’s a lot of different people seeing something before it gets Okayed.

Interviewer: Which is obviously an antecedent to social media.

Stephen: Yes.

Interviewer: Which is meant to be fluid, dynamic and alive.

Stephen: Yes.

Interviewer: But I would imagine that, that a common challenge for those big projects.

Stephen: Yes. I understand it. But if you want to volunteer with it, it’s off-putting, but I totally understand. Totally understand.  
  
But the problem is that if you’ve got- Rachel’s not very good with social media or not very bothered about it. If she was better at it, then she wouldn’t have to ask questions of Ian and then Ian doesn’t have time to come back to you. If he was based here, if he was more accessible, it would be easier.

Interviewer: Yes. Okay, so again it’s the setup. Yes.

Stephen: Yes.

Interviewer: Okay.

Stephen: So there’s a sense of control over it and also, insecurity. Nobody wants to piss anybody else off and there’s so many people that could get annoyed.

Interviewer: There’s lots of people on the list too.

Stephen: So I understand. But it’s inhibiting if you’re somebody who just wants to express themselves or, you know-

Interviewer: Or share it, or do good stuff \_\_\_[1:10:01].

Stephen: Yes. So it would be nice if Walthamstow Wetlands was, itself, an organisation. I sort of said this before, I’ve said “Not a Walthamstow-specific organisation”. So London Wildlife Trust has loads of other projects and I feel like saying to Ian “This is so much bigger than any other of your projects”.  
  
When I send him something and he ignores it or doesn’t retweet it, she says to me “Well, we’ve got 40 different in London” and I think this one is much bigger than any of those, “You should be treating me differently than somebody else who is doing a much smaller project”.

Interviewer: So let me put that down. That’s interesting isn’t it? Thinking of it as a separate organisation.

Stephen: I didn’t know whether to introduce myself. Probably not because- what do you think? Probably best not.

Interviewer: No.

Stephen: Yes.

Interviewer: In a different context.

Stephen: Yes. So I’m taking photos of what Salix are doing and then giving it to Rachel and knowing Rachel, suddenly to her- I don’t know. Anyway. But apparently, she’s not bothered about what happens on Twitter so she doesn’t know what’s going on.   
  
Anyway, sorry. Yes, so it would be great if there was a Walthamstow Wetlands organisation of its own.

Interviewer: Yes, I see what you’re saying, yes. And then they can dedicate their time and I think that probably there is an ambition for that to be the direction of travel that- I think the individual parties have travelled so much distance already, just to come to this point that they feel like they’ve made a massive leap of faith already.  
  
So the challenges that you’re identifying are ones that are there for them when they’ve already gone from there to there and I guess that I can see the [malice 1:12:15]-

Stephen: And it’s just a matter of time.

Interviewer: Yes, I hope so.

Stephen: Yes, but it might be ten years.

Interviewer: So anything else at all?

Stephen: No, I think I’ve said everything. Yes, hopefully more people from Walthamstow will get involved and then I’ll start resenting them.

Interviewer: (Laughter). That would be good progress. You’ll want to say “Look I’ve been here. I was here at the beginning”.

Stephen: Yes.

END AUDIO

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