

THERE'S NO  
SUCH THING  
AS TOO MUCH  
INFORMATION



surfers against sewage



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## AS TOO MUCH INFORMATION

Public information has become an integral part of our everyday lives. Signs warning of cows on the road or a tight corner coming up, the red, green and amber of a traffic light, information on food products warning those with nut, dairy or wheat intolerances, warnings that a programme on TV may have adult content. Information enabling us to make choices infiltrates every part of our daily activities. Warning systems have unsurprisingly entered into our leisure environment too - avalanche warnings at ski-resorts, signs warning of water depths at swimming pools, red and yellow flags on beaches marking the safer places to bathe.

These public information systems (warning signs, lights, caution labelling etc) are designed to make life safer, to help reduce the number of accidents and deaths that occur needlessly. We consciously and subconsciously make numerous decisions daily based on the information that is provided to us in forms that have become totally integrated into daily life.

We, the public make the decision to acknowledge or ignore it but by making the information available in an easy to understand, standard format we are given the opportunity to make the all important choice.



## WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THE WATER?

Surfers Against Sewage (SAS) believe that there is one part of our lives where there is a distinct lack of public information and where it is impossible for us, the general public to make an informed choice before taking part in what can be a high-risk activity.

With 20 million people visiting the UK's coastline each year and a growing trend in the uptake of recreational water sports, SAS are pressing for easy to understand and easy to spot water

quality information to become a regular part of a trip to the beach.

In acknowledgement of the fact that water quality fluctuates on an hourly basis and that fortnightly water quality sampling provides little more than data for spreadsheets, SAS are asking all local authorities to consider how best to arm the general public with the information they need in order to make an informed choice about whether or not they go in the water.

# WHAT SORT OF INFORMATION?

There are two main types of information that would help the public in making this choice:

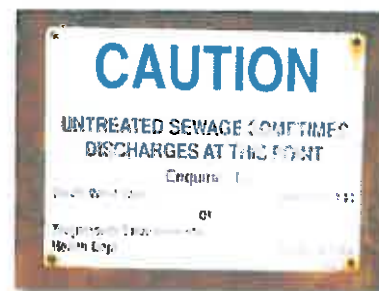
## PERMANENT SIGNAGE

Firstly, permanent signage displaying the location of all sewage outfalls should be erected at all popular locations.

A map of the beach, with both continuous and intermittent discharges and their respective mixing zones in relation to water use areas should be marked, and this site-specific map should be prominently displayed at each location. The map should also feature the Environment Agency sampling location so that the member of public may see where this is in relation to where they wish to use the water and where it is in relation to sewage discharge points.



It is also essential for all sewage discharge points, particularly those in areas that are accessible to the general public, to be marked by a permanent sign. The sign below was mounted on the wall following the recommendations of a Coroner at the inquest into a young girls death. Heather Preen and her family had walked through the mixture of raw sewage and rainwater discharged by an un-marked Combined Sewer Overflow during a family visit to the beach. Heathers' mother has said that if the sign had been there when the family visited the beach they would never have walked across the stream of effluent as it made it's way to the sea.



***To recap, SAS believe it is necessary for permanent signage, both maps and warning signs (marking discharge points) to be displayed at all designated or well used beaches.***



## TEMPORARY SIGNAGE

At the present time beach goers are 'protected' from the hazards of sewage polluted water via a water sampling regime outlined in the 1976 Bathing Water Directive. A scoop of water is taken from each designated bathing water every two weeks and once the sample has been checked for faecal bacteria it will be given a grading 'in relation to standards set down in the Directive.

This data collection is basically an exercise in number crunching. Aside from the fact that it usually takes a few days to a few weeks for water quality information to reach the relevant local authority, water quality changes on an hourly basis, something a fortnightly sampling regimes can't hope to reflect.

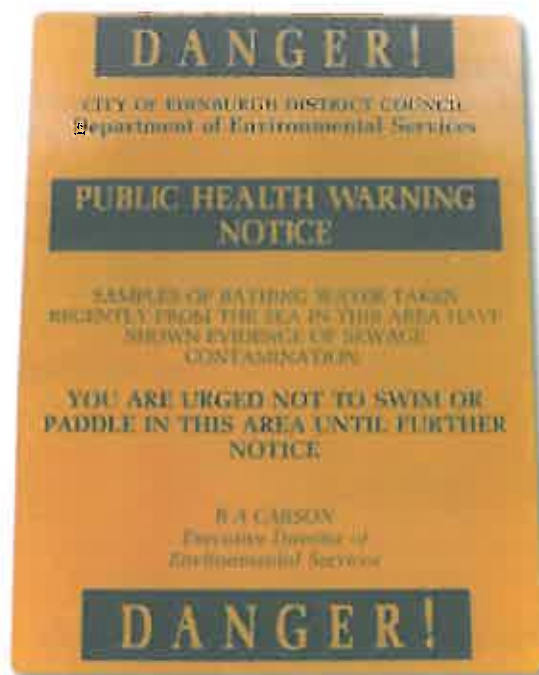
In recognition of the fact that water quality changes hour to hour and can be influenced by factors that cannot be immediately remedied, SAS are proposing that temporary signage be used at all designated and popular recreational waters as a further information tool.

This kind of information would be required under two types of circumstance the first being if sampling reveals that water quality has fallen below European

mandatory standards. Since water sampling only occurs fortnightly through the bathing season (and may therefore not reveal blips in quality), temporary signage should also be erected if any aspect of the sewage treatment scheme experiences technical problems resulting in discharge of untreated (including screened) sewage.

With regards signage to warn the public of known failures in quality, this Autumn SAS carried out a study to determine which local authorities with a beach which this bathing season failed to meet mandatory standards under their remit, succeeded in informing the public of this failure. Out of 30 local authorities, only one, Teignbridge District Council took action following a failed sample.

Although it only takes 48 hours to enumerate water quality samples most local authorities reported at least a weeks delay in them obtaining the results from the Environment Agency, by which time they considered it too late to act. SAS would like to see this relay of information taking place far quicker and for a warning sign to be immediately erected at the beach following the reporting of a failed sample. The sign should be removed once water samples indicate that quality is once again above the legal minimum.



## **CLOSING THE BEACH**

SAS do not think that closing a beach during a pollution incident is the answer. Providing relevant information in the right format enables us, the public to

make an informed choice about when, where and if to go in the water. It should be our decision to make.

## **A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD**

This system of beach information provision should ultimately become a Europe wide initiative. Signage on beaches should become as well-integrated and as accepted as the warning signs we see around us on a daily basis. SAS hope that the UK will take the initiative and be the first to implement such a scheme.

The revision of the 1976 Bathing Water Directive provides the opportunity for public information provision to be detailed within a legal framework. SAS hope that this opportunity to improve public health protection in a practical and realistic way is not missed.



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