

Swimming In Sewage: Why UK Law Is Still Failing Our Seas...

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Why this is an issue...

Recently, Channel 4 drama series 'Dirty Business' stirred up public anger surrounding the privatisation of the British water industry. The series dives into the numerous mishandlings which have arisen: corporate financial scandals, regulatory issues, extreme illness resulting from leaks and in the most dire cases, death. Whistleblowing inside these water companies has aided in bringing awareness to the continuing discharges. However, water works continue to cause illegal and legal leaks, creating damning effects for human health, marine life and UK ocean pollution levels. Since 2015, 69 prosecutions have been brought against water companies, awarding fines just over £153 million. Furthermore, later this year, Thames Water will be sentenced for 18 discharges of raw sewage occurring between 2017 and 2023. These results seem to bring justice on the face of it, but the repeated offences and effects which arise continue nevertheless. In 2024 alone, nearly 1 million sewage dumpings occurred which is one every 30 seconds. In 2023, 'Surfers Against Sewage' (charity) received 1,924 reports of people falling unwell after entering UK waters.

What the law is doing...

These repeated sewage leaks and scandals have led to a wide distrust of water companies in the UK. An attempt to rectify this position was made through the 2025 implementation of the Water (Special Measures) Act. This act aimed to block bonuses for water executives whose companies were repeatedly breaching pollution regulations; bring criminal charges against persistent law offenders to avoid repeated leaks with no action and ensure strength of regulatory bodies. This act does not reform the current industry, it merely seeks to prevent a continuation of such failure. The current UK Government has also vowed to end self-monitoring operations (a significant contributor to waste leaks in recent years). The act seems to have a positive influence, Thames Water (despite denying a lack of transparency) have claimed they are undergoing their biggest update in 150 years. As well as this, the Environment Agency claims they have made significant changes, upping inspections to 10,000 annually. They have also vowed to update their storm overflow framework after the Office for Environmental Protection ruled they had broken the law through regulation failures.

Why the act doesn't do enough...

Despite this act being welcomed, it is debateable whether future risks have actually been resolved with a gap between the law in statute and in action still being prevalent. Even with impositions on executive bonuses, Yorkshire and Thames Water bosses received millions in retention payments after the implementation. Thames Water also requested a 15 year grace period from the government, allowing them to be free from environmental law prosecution. This request in itself highlights how extreme the water industry situation has become. Sewage leaks and breaches will continue to occur until it is no longer profitable, which considering water companies have extracted over £85bn in dividends, would be a reasonable step forward.

What more can be done...

Going forward, the public should not rely on the 2025 act alone to rectify decades of systemic failure. Privatisation decisions made in 1989 are no longer relevant in modern day after such a significant amount of corruption, investment scandals and repeated breaches. Our oceans and seas already being subjected to overfishing, mining, pollution from microplastics and global warming should be treated with the upmost care, allowing private companies to disobey this requires persistent action and change. The financial affluence of these private companies being shown through investment grants and the ability to pay large fines begs the question: why can't years of failure be rectified in modern day?

The British public continue to campaign, the recent 'fountain of filth' displayed in London attracted great social media presence, of which people often take to, sharing videos and pictures of leaks they have encountered. The more awareness is spread, the more accountability water companies must take and as seen in the past, will deliver movement towards change. Currently, local claims have emerged around UK coasts, allowing residents to gain power in numbers (www.leighday.co.uk). There are also over 295,000 signatures to re-nationalise the water industry, which is being backed by environmental experts and many who remain angered after watching the drama.

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