

River Meon vehicle damage, Droxford, Hampshire

What is happening

A short stretch of the River Meon at Droxford is being used by 4X4 vehicles and motorbikes for recreational driving directly along the riverbed. Vehicles are repeatedly driving up and down the river, not simply crossing it.

Videos circulating on social media platforms including TikTok and Facebook show this activity clearly. Some are posted by accounts associated with a group calling itself Three Counties Laners, promoting use of the route.

The River Meon is a chalk stream, one of the rarest freshwater habitats in the world, and is particularly vulnerable to physical disturbance of its riverbed and gravels. It is designated as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC).

Hampshire County Council regard this stretch of the river as a designated highway, so it is legal for vehicles to drive along it. They do have powers to impose a Traffic Regulation Order restricting vehicular access, but so far have not done so.

Why this matters ecologically

Chalk streams depend on clean gravels, stable flows and intact riverbeds to support invertebrates, fish and spawning habitats. Physical disturbance from vehicles can damage spawning gravels, alter river morphology and reduce biodiversity.

The River Meon supports vulnerable and endangered species such as Atlantic salmon, water voles and otters.

Ecological surveys commissioned for public authorities themselves have identified concerns at this location.

An aquatic ecology report commissioned by Hampshire County Council found that the section of river used by vehicles showed reduced fish and invertebrate diversity compared with nearby stretches and concluded that vehicle use was having an adverse impact on the river habitat. The report identified closure of the forded route to vehicles as the primary mitigation measure.

Separate surveys and assessments by the South Downs National Park Authority have acknowledged that the condition of the riverbed at the splash route is a cause for concern. The Authority has accepted that the issue warrants continued monitoring and management.

The Meon is also designated by Natural England as compensatory habitat to the SAC-protected River Itchen, meaning it should enjoy the same protection as that of the Itchen. In effect, government policy requires public bodies to prevent deterioration of the river environment.

What authorities have done so far

Concerns about vehicle damage to the River Meon have been raised repeatedly over several years by local residents, riparian owners and environmental groups.

In 2022, Hampshire County Council said it regarded the route as an unclassified highway and that vehicle use was lawful under that designation.

In response to growing concern, ecological surveys were commissioned and completed during 2023. Residents requested the results of the surveys but were told by the council that not only did the survey show no damage to the river but that they would not be sharing the survey results. Following persistent communication from the Test and Itchen Association, the council acknowledged that they were indeed required to share the survey results and that, contrary to their earlier claims, the survey showed environmental damage in this stretch of the River Meon.

In 2025, Hampshire County Council considered the use of formal regulatory powers, including traffic restrictions, but decided not to pursue them.

In November 2025, the South Downs National Park Authority formally reviewed the issue and endorsed a continued approach based on voluntary codes of conduct with off road vehicle groups, further monitoring and potential river engineering works, rather than restricting vehicle access.

In January 2026 Hampshire County Council wrote to Fish Legal saying that work to address the situation was being “deferred for an indefinite period.”

Throughout this period, vehicles have continued to enter and drive along the riverbed resulting in ongoing environmental damage.

Why people are protesting now

Local residents and campaigners say the issue has moved beyond evidence gathering.

They argue that public authorities have had clear evidence of ecological damage for over a year, have assessed regulatory options and have chosen not to act, while damage continues.

Protesters believe that voluntary approaches are failing, as demonstrated by ongoing vehicle use and the public promotion of driving through the river on social media.

What protesters want

Protesters are calling for:

- Immediate restrictions on vehicle access to the riverbed using existing powers, to stop further ecological harm. This means issuing a Traffic Regulation Order (TRO).
- Hampshire County Council and the South Downs Parks Authority to fulfil their legal obligations to protect the River Meon from this ongoing and confirmed damage.
- They are not calling for the permanent closure of surrounding access routes. The focus is on preventing vehicles from driving through the river purely for recreational purposes itself and protecting a rare, vulnerable and globally important chalk stream and its wildlife.