

# The Tarka Trail Project

*Dr Graham Wills*

The 'thunderous roar of trains in the valley', that Tarka grew accustomed to as a cub is heard no more. The railways of north Devon have all gone save for the branch line from Exeter to Barnstaple. But the routes they followed are now assuming a new role under an exciting and ambitious project being pursued by Devon County Council. Already some 14 miles of disused railway line between Braunton, Barnstaple and Bideford have been covered for use by walkers and cyclists. The Council is now negotiating to acquire a further 17 miles of line between Bideford and Meeth. This route closely follows the River Torridge for 7 miles between Bideford and Torrington affording superb views of many of the key locations in *Tarka the Otter* such as Canal Bridge, Weare Giffard, Beam Weir and the Pool of the Six Herons. South of Torrington the disused railway follows the route taken by Tarka with his mother and sisters to Merton and Marland Moors. So has evolved the idea of creating a 'Tarka Trail' — a long-distance path which would enable walkers to explore and enjoy the beautiful countryside of north Devon while retracing the journeys that are so vividly described in *Tarka the Otter*.

The County Council sees such a Trail as the centrepiece of a much wider conservation, recreation and tourism initiative — 'the Tarka Project' — that would bring economic benefit to north Devon. It might stimulate a range of conservation measures such as the protection of sensitive areas, tree planting, pond digging, establishment of nature reserves, recreational projects (e.g. shorter trails, pony trekking, guided walks, hides for watching wildlife) and tourism ventures (e.g. scenic drives, accommodation, activity holidays, promotional literature). The aims of the project are:

- to project and enrich the wildlife, natural beauty and special character of north Devon;
- to encourage public enjoyment and understanding of the new area, and
- to promote tourism and recreation.

Underlying these aims is the conviction that they need not conflict, and the intention to demonstrate that the conservation of our natural environment, illuminated by a classic of English literature, can make a significant contribution to the social and economic well-being of the area.

Otters, which have declined so dramatically throughout most of England, still survive in the 'land of the two rivers' and signs of Tarka's descendants can still be found. A guiding principle throughout the study has been the welfare of the existing otter population and of other wildlife communities. To this end Trevor Beer, the well-known north Devon naturalist, was appointed as an adviser at the initial stages of the project and help has also come from the Vincent Wildlife Trust which specialises in otter conservation. The County Council has recently commissioned

the Devon Trust for Nature Conservation to undertake a wildlife survey of the disused railway line and adjoining land.

It is already possible to follow a 'Tarka Trail' of some 53 miles from Lynmouth to Bideford along the South West Peninsula Coast Path (including sections on the disused railways) visiting many of the places described in *Tarka the Otter*: East Cleave, Heddons Mouth, Wild Pear Beach, Bull Point, Morte Point, Baggy Point, Braunton Burrows, Braunton Marshes, Rams Horn Pond and the Taw/Torridge Estuary. The conversion of the Bideford to Meeth disused railway line will give views of the River Torridge and especially the area where Tarka was born and where his story ends. The next step will be to try to link these sections so as to create a long distance circular walk using existing

public rights of way. In total the trail might extend for perhaps 180 miles but a range of shorter, circular routes will also be developed.

A draft report on the Tarka Project is due to be circulated for comment during the summer of 1987. The County Council is anxious to ensure that the special character and fragile charm of the area is maintained and that they have the support and co-operation of the local community. All those who care about the area and love the story are urged to let the County Council have their comments and ideas so that the 'Tarka Project', and the Tarka Trail in particular, can be developed in the best possible way. For further information please contact Dr Graham Wills, Amenities and Countryside Division, Property Department, Devon County Council, County Hall, Exeter EX2 4QQ.

