

River 'flowing with coke'

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London - Scientists have been stunned to discover huge amounts of cocaine residue in an Italian river, suggesting massive consumption of the drug among local people, a British environmental journal revealed on Friday.

The findings in the Po valley, northern Italy, suggest drug use is far higher than previously thought.

It calculated about 40 000 doses of cocaine per day are consumed in the valley, home to around five million people.

The Po is Italy's longest river, flowing westwards from the Alps to the Adriatic Sea through Turin. Milan is also in the Po valley.

The study, published by Britain's Environmental Health magazine, tested rivers and sewage for levels of a by-product of cocaine metabolism.

Official figures say 1.1% of Italians aged 15 to 34 admit to having taken the drug at least once over the past month.

That implies cocaine is used around 15 000 times per month by the 1.4 million people in that age bracket living around the Po.

Italian researchers measured levels of Benzoylcegonine in the water. The chemical, found in urine, cannot be produced by any other means than cocaine use.

Through urine, the chemical found its way into the Po and the sewerage system.

The researchers said at least 27 100-milligram cocaine doses per 1 000 young adults would have to be taken per day to produce so much of the chemical.

"The economic impact of trafficking such a large amount of cocaine would be staggering," the scientists wrote.