

**Sustainable Management - Salmonid Fisheries & Angling Communities Wales
(Originator: Reuben Woodford)**

In support of petition to be considered on 1 May 2018

Background to our petition

NRWs Fisheries Stock Control Byelaws are NOT a proportionate response to the current pressures our salmonid fisheries face.

The primary problem impacting salmon stocks is not exploitation by anglers or a lack of adult salmon reaching spawning sites. The decline in salmon stocks has been caused by a multiple of adverse conditions both in-river and at sea, NRW accepts that angler exploitation is not a root cause but is failing to address the root causes.

It is the losses from eggs deposited to smolts i.e. young salmon migrating to sea which is the key to reversal of the decline. The NRW technical case claims that by increasing the numbers of salmon reaching the spawning grounds this will reverse the decline, after more than 20 years on some rivers of compulsory catch and release there is no evidence that this improves the number of smolts which reach the sea.

Causes of excessive egg and juvenile mortality are numerous e.g. siltation of spawning gravels; water pollution; natural predation; barriers to seaward migration and increasing climatic variability with climate change. Whilst man plays an obvious part in influencing such variables; anglers do not pillage spawning gravels for fish eggs, nor do they fish for juvenile salmonids. How therefore have anglers become the primary target for ill advised action that poses such a substantial risk to the Welsh economy, Welsh community culture and the very relationships that current future fisheries management is dependent upon (and thus future sustainability).

It is known by NRW that 40% to 50% of smolts are lost, as they migrate to the sea, to predation mainly to fish eating birds i.e. goosander, merganser. It should be noted that goosander and merganser were not native birds; they were winter migrants and have no predators in the UK. They arrived in Scotland in the 1950's and there are now more than 1000 nesting pairs in Wales each bird will eat 146Kg of fish per year and according to the British Trust for ornithology it takes 33Kg of fish to raise one chick to adult, these birds have broods of 10 plus and only eat fish, they predate on salmonid stocks from egg to smolt. Further smolt predation is caused by cormorants on their migration to the sea; controlling avian predation would have a far greater effect on reversing the decline than the draconian proposals in the byelaws.

In 2016 a natural resources report, found 63% of all freshwater courses in Wales were not achieving the necessary status. Other than reducing fishing effort NRW's proposals will do little or nothing to reverse the decline in fish stocks. Nothing in the proposals will improve this. Additionally, efforts to improve fisheries by stakeholders have been obstructed by the WG agencies as stakeholder initiatives were perceived as a threat by agency employees and thus permits for any habitat works have either been withheld or refused in many cases.

Since our petition and lobbying of the Welsh Government in a press release on 24 April from NRW there is now to be a deferment on the proposed byelaws until 2019. The press release deliberately uses emotive words e.g. 'uncontrolled killing' but recognises that is by a minority, this is not based on any objective evidence just hearsay and personal beliefs and opinions. We know from the press release that NRW will not consider any further negotiation on the measures. It is time for obstructive practices of this nature to cease. They should have no part in exemplary approaches devised to promote sustainable fisheries and communities.

We therefore request that the petitions committee support our request for an inquiry as per Section 26 of the Water Resources Act 1991. Without an inquiry we cannot voice our concerns or more effective solutions to the Welsh Government. It should be noted that more than 83% of respondents to the NRW consultation on the byelaw proposals objected, our objections were dismissed out of hand and we were asked to withdraw them.

The aims of our Petition

The crux of the matter is that changes to the proposed byelaws by NRW will have little or no effect on reversing the decline in salmon stocks but will have a significant impact upon the socio-economics of rural communities in Wales. The consequential impacts of the byelaws would not benefit future generations and due to the extent of method restrictions would destroy the cultural positivity that angling provides.

During the consultation upon NRW's byelaws we stated the methodology used by NRW (and EA/European countries) was flawed. Working with the North West Anglers Trust Consultative Committee (England) we jointly funded a review of the methodology, by consultants from Dublin University. This is an independent review of the statistical methodology used in the UK. The statement and report received from the consultant statisticians from Dublin University supports our claims that there are serious concerns over the data used by both NRW and the EA which underpin their case for new byelaws. A copy of our consultants report has been forwarded to the Cabinet Secretary.

The Salmon & Sea Trout fishing community in Wales call for a proportionate and targeted response that incorporates key components within its strategy:

- In order to prevent the excesses of fish keep, introduce catchment specific targets managed by angling clubs creating resilience for angling clubs, recognising that all catchments have unique characteristics.
- Comprehensive stocking programmes of native fish based on best practice examples. As successfully demonstrated through third party stocking on the Conwy and Dovey.
- Tighten and enforce legislation to control the widespread impact of pollution, in particular pollution from agriculture.
- Investigate and prevent by-catch of smolts/salmon by pelagic trawlers and other net fishing at sea.
- Meaningful prevention of excessive natural predation rates upon salmonids in particular from piscivorous birds.
- Remove barriers to fish migration and prevent irresponsible developments incorporating new ones within our river systems.

We must continue to restore and enhance our river habitats so that they are optimised to support adult and juvenile fish and that we continue to improve our understanding and evidence base in relation to fish stocks both in their riverine and ocean habitats. It seems incomprehensible that NRW's proposed byelaws offer little means of improving fish stocks and bring immediate risk to their own evidence base and to angling.

You may be told that the improvements on the Wye justify these draconian measures i.e. that the imposition of total Catch & Release (C&R) in 2012 has resulted in some improvement in Wye salmon stocks. The reality, is this improvement has been as a result of the work of the Wye & Usk Foundation, who over 15 years has carried out habitat restoration, acid waters amelioration, removal of circa 60 fish passes and easements, net buy offs etc. There is no evidence from any river system in the UK that C&R measures, which have been in place on some Scottish rivers for more than 20 years, are effective in re-establishing salmon stocks. In all instances, we are allowing adult salmon to return to environments depleted in their ability to support spawning and juvenile fish without addressing critical and obvious causes.

NRW's proposed byelaws have taken little or no notice of stakeholders concerns; 83% of respondents to NRW's consultation did not support the byelaw proposals and NRW's own Board Members in January 2018 had to remind the Chair this was not an acceptable partnership situation and must as a matter of urgency be rectified – this has not been done and thus the stakeholder partnership hangs in the balance.

Nobody is in doubt, that Salmon stocks in particular, are showing significant variability and as a consequence anglers have adopted behaviours that contribute to a precautionary approach (most salmon anglers return all of the fish they catch). As anglers we play a significant part in promoting conservation measures and proportionate catch and release is now well established across all fisheries. In contradiction to a recent trend, fishing club figures show salmon runs in 2017 in many Welsh rivers were above average. EA/NRW has failed to provide their 2017 season dataset presumably as these may undermine their beliefs. Adverse weather conditions between 2011 and 2015 have caused poor recruitment of Salmon although the impact varies between individual catchments. NRW recognises that anglers are not the problem and a FOI from CEFAS acknowledges that these proposals will do little or nothing to reverse a perceived decline. NRW's focus is simply in the wrong place.

Our current fear is that WG will be persuaded to approve the proposals without providing the major stakeholders a chance to offer a workable solution which does not require legislation. No revised system can work without communities playing their part and being integral to its development.

We must as a matter of urgency apply a revised response; this is being denied to us by NRW hence the petition. We must establish a strategy for Salmonid Fisheries that is proportional to the issues and establishes a way forward that is supported by all key players. We have support from clubs and river trusts across Wales. Having talked to, and having the support of, both the North Wales Rivers Trusts and Afonydd Cymru, we would offer the following solution. These are our outline proposals:

- Use the Rivers Trusts, working in co-operation with stakeholders and NRW to assess stock levels in individual river systems. Trusts, using their local volunteers, have far better' knowledge of their rivers and can obtain accurate catch returns and stock assessments from clubs. We could then categorise our rivers as has been done in Scotland and Ireland. If rivers require additional restrictions due to low stock levels at least we would have the support of the affected clubs as we will be working in partnership with them.

We must recognise that currently not all rivers in Wales are failing to meet their conservation limits (the threshold stated by NASCO as the key indicator of risk to stocks) and yet NRW are attempting to apply a pan Wales action that implies they are.

- By working with clubs we can involve the local community in assessing the state of their rivers and work with them to ensure workable conservation measures are put in place.
- Afonydd Cymru would act as the co-ordinator for the Rivers Trusts and would liaise with NRW on technical matters. This would be cost neutral and would go a long way to bridge the budget gap NRW fisheries are now facing.
- This approach would include stocking of our rivers. In terms of stocking, NRW object to this based purely on personal beliefs and opinions that stocking is harmful. There is not a scientific case that backs this opinion up. The stocking on

the Conwy and Dovey demonstrated that at no cost to NRW/WG the decline in salmon numbers can be reversed.

If we are to sustain Wales Salmonid Fisheries we must, work together. We must participate in a manner that instils trust and mutual respect within partnerships in order to galvanise a transitioned and adaptive process to optimised fisheries. In the absence of partnerships, desired outcomes can only be a pipe dream. It makes no sense that NRW are failing to see that trust, within cooperative partnership, is something you develop and not retro fit to bulldozed draconian byelaws. We are very much reliant on WG to work with us on this and adjudicate and rectify a situation that has got out of hand.

The Welsh Government has clarified in its Natural Resources Policy (NRP), that our rivers and seas provide important recreational angling opportunities and economic benefit in rural and coastal communities. If WG recognises the economic and social benefit of fisheries, they must understand the byelaws would bring a significant reduction in revenue from anglers and angling visitors due to the restrictions the byelaws impose. Not only would we be actively promoting a net export of fishing tourism, we would be denying our own people a life experience shared between generations across generations. Fishing has been given no custodianship in this process. We must all be reminded, the proposed byelaw changes cannot significantly improve fish stocks – the remit we have all been given.

The Minister wants to see thriving rivers supporting anglers, the alternative measures we propose are the optimal option to achieve this. Angling institutions are best placed to improve their rivers and yet they are being prevented from doing this effectively. NRW are obstructing these improvements based on personal beliefs and opinion. It has been pointed out that WG/NRW are delinquent in the way these proposals have been published.

If the new byelaws are implemented without stakeholders' objections being addressed, as required by the Water Resources Act 1991, the Welsh Government can be accused of presiding over a situation that is not appropriate for a 21st century western democracy.

Under Section 26 of the Water Resources Act 1991 there is provision for an inquiry should objections not be dealt with, we have written to the Minister pointing this out. It is clear that there has been pre-determination in the implementation of the NRW byelaws and method restriction proposals and whilst it is accepted that action needs to be taken in order to reverse the decline in salmon stocks, these proposals will not achieve this whilst alternative options can.

Without stakeholder involvement it is inconceivable on the basis of the evidence before us, that the decline in salmon stocks will be reversed. We cannot allow the current and future management of this situation to be dominated by a myopic approach created by a regulatory organisation in budgetary, resource and aspirational deficit. We must, for the future of Wales fisheries and the economic and social prosperity that angling provides to its citizens, work together on an integrated strategy.

There is no doubt, without the support of the fishing fraternity and like minded organisations, our rivers would be depleted of their primary custodians.