



Editor's letter

*Government reliance on limited science undermines its attempts to gain the support of anglers, says **Andrew Flitcroft***

THE 2015 salmon season closed itself. It often happens when autumn rains come. The rivers were just too high to fish. But there was another problem.

Not only did many rivers flood, on the few occasions they were fishable the unseasonably warm water encouraged the fish to shoot straight through to the headwaters. I'm told the upper rivers were crawling with salmon. In fishing terms it was a huge disappointment; in conservation terms, what could be better?

Last autumn's poor returns prove unquestionably that rod catches are no measure of a river's true stock and why Scottish Government's way of determining a river's Conservation Limit is flawed. The overwhelming omission in current salmon fishery management is that we are using guesswork and blanket scientific calculations to determine the sustainability of stocks on individual and perhaps disparate rivers. If far-reaching and potentially damaging policies, such as mandatory catch-and-release, are introduced, there first needs to be hard proof on which to base them.

We need fish counters on rivers. That is surely the only way you can ascertain robust figures and truly know what you are dealing with on a catchment-by-catchment river-by-river basis. Scottish Government need to make this happen.

And if there aren't enough fish in our rivers, so be it - at least we'll have an accurate measure of the problem.

Of course, Scotland is not alone. Management strategy on English and Welsh rivers is under scrutiny. In November, DEFRA and the EA held a Salmon Summit to examine the decline of stocks in England. The meeting was attended by UK Government Minister George Eustace. Salmon & Trout Conservation (S&TC), the Angling Trust (AT) and North Atlantic Salmon Fund (NASF) presented their concerns about the state of salmon stocks and stressed the need for urgent restorative action by Government. The AT's Mark Lloyd reports on the meeting on p8 - in essence the key discussions were around netting and catch-and-release.

During the summit the Government proposed the temporary suspension of all netting of salmon and the introduction of mandatory catch-and-release. The possible cessation of netting, especially of coastal mixed-stock fisheries, was warmly received. Orri Vigfusson, chair of NASE, said, "NASF is pleased that at last the public sector is admitting the critical decline in stocks. For too long its officials have underestimated the extent and urgency of the problem and placed too



much reliance on research and analysis. Scientific assessment of all the relevant data has utterly failed to arrest this decline over decades. Instead of considering the east coast as a whole, fragmented management in England and Scotland has not fully considered the underlying biological factors. Consequently, mixed-stock fisheries have further reduced spawning stock."

Orri also accused the private sector of a lack of support for practical efforts that are necessary [hatcheries, netting buy-outs] and compared the minimalist state management in Iceland with the heavy hand of officialdom in the UK.

He also highlighted the success of the English Tyne and Iceland's Ranga. "These rivers rely on massive stocking. In their different ways, they demonstrate it's high time UK organisations re-examine their traditional reliance on scientific advice. It is a fact that most data used to denigrate the potential of stocking is based on old and useless hatchery practices carried out in ignorance of vital environmental factors in a river that determine whether a young salmon, of wild or hatchery origin, lives or dies."

He says scientists must clear their minds of ancient history, examine the management elements that support the success of the Tyne and the Ranga and question the beliefs on which their advice is based.

The proposal for mandatory catch-and-release was met with opposition. Force anglers - whose licence money and volunteer work protects salmon - to put all their salmon back and they may vote with their feet.

S&TC's Paul Knight said, "Some anglers claim they should be allowed to kill fish because it is not their fault stocks have declined. True, there is little blame to be levelled at anglers, but surely it is still irresponsible to kill fish from weak populations, whatever the cause of

their demise? The discussion should be whether catch-and-release is compulsory, or can anglers be trusted to act responsibly, as the vast majority now do, in returning fish voluntarily on threatened rivers? In

Ireland, if salmon numbers fail to reach 65 per cent of conservation targets, the river is closed, and that's something we don't want in England. Closed fisheries take anglers' eyes off the river so poaching and pollution can pass unnoticed."

The methods currently used to set conservation targets were also under scrutiny. Paul Knight admits many fisheries people are sceptical about calculating conservation targets based on catch statistics. So, S&TC UK are demanding better assessments, including independent data, so that anglers have more confidence in targets set for their rivers. **T&S**

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