

NATURAL RESOURCES WALES

NOTE OF WORKSHOP ON THE NRW SALMON AND SEA TROUT STOCKING DECISION

FINAL VERSION

VENUE:	United Reformed Church, central Cardiff
DATE AND TIME	2 nd September 1030 - 1530
IN ATTENDANCE:	
North Wales	John Eardley (Prince Albert Angling Society) Huw Hughes (Seiont Gwyrfai & Llyfni Anglers Society) John Roe (Dee Fishery Association) Michael Stirk Chris White (Conwy Valley Fisheries and Conservation Association)
	CVFCA Technical Advisor - Dr David Cragg-Hine
River Wye	Stuart Smith (Wye Salmon Association) Jerome Vaughan
Environment Agency	Godfrey Williams (Environment and Business Manager Fisheries) Chris Bainger (Fisheries Technical Specialist)
NRW	Ceri Davies (Executive Director for Knowledge Strategy and Planning) Michael Evans (Head of Knowledge Evidence and Advice) Peter Gough (Senior Technical Specialist)
NRW Academic advisors	Professor Carlos Garcia de Leaniz, Swansea University Dr Philip McGinnity, University College Cork
Welsh Government	Jeremy Frost Rob Floyd
Apologies for absence	Ken Bathers (River Dee)

AGENDA

Meeting chaired by Mike Evans

1. Introductions ALL
2. Setting the scene for the day C.Davies
How we will make the day successful for all M.Evans
3. NRW Position - how we got to this point:
evidence, risk, Habitats Directive P.Gough
4. Environment Agency position G.Williams
5. Expert advisers presentations (15 minutes each) and discussion Carlos GdL
Phil McG
6. Opportunity for stakeholder group representations and discussion C.White
D.Cragg-
Hine
S.Smith
7. Structured discussion
Does stocking work and is it effective?
What are the risks?
What are the alternatives?
What is Natural Resource Management?
When might stocking be relevant?
8. Wrap-up – concluding position M.Evans

MEETING NOTE

- 1, 2. ME and CD provided an introduction to the day.
- 3,4. PG and GW presented on the respective positions of NRW and the Environment Agency on the stocking of salmon and sea trout into rivers in Wales and England.

These presentations are attached.

5. The expert advisors to NRW, Professor Carlos Garcia de Leaniz and Dr Phil McGinnity then gave presentations on their experience and research.

These presentations are attached, with permission of the authors.

6. Comments from CW:-

Stocking has a prime role in conserving the stocks in the Conwy
There has been successful operation of smolt ponds for 16 years
NRW communications are abysmal. NRW should take note of discussions, such as those today, before taking decisions
The way the Board decision was taken led to the immediate closure of the Dyfi hatchery
Note the issues around predation by otters and birds.

Comments from Dr Cragg-Hine

DCH noted that although he is retired he provides advice to the Welsh Dee Trust.
DCH queried the definition of the term 'fitness' as used in PM's presentation.

PM explained that the succinct definition is the ability to pass genes to the next generation.

DCH explained that the reason for stocking in the Dee was the loss of a lot of habitat due to Celyn and Tryweryn and posed the question how could this be reversed. He continued to say that stocking was one of the tools.

DCH referred to high marine mortality of salmon, and concluded that the solution to this was to put out as many smolts as possible in addition to opening up areas to fish by removing obstructions.

A group discussion followed, the main points from which were:-

The objective (of our work with salmon and sea trout) should address a range of drivers.

The role of Alternative Mitigation (AM) was noted in relation to delivery of Water Framework Directive (WFD) objectives, but AM should be more 'over-and-above'. It was requested that the group present today should be copied-in on AM plans and delivery.

CW noted that grilse (1SW) salmon are multiple spawners (CGL observed that most 1SW are male), and that a mix of smolt ages, including 1,2 and 3 year old smolts, provides insurance (against factors affecting survival).

HH stated that he came in hope to this meeting. He could not argue with the science, but made these points:-

The Seiont has lost about 80% of its habitat

The Seiont has been a community fishery and has provided great local benefit.

The power station mitigation scheme has not been used properly, having seen stocking in 12 of the last 30 years.

The Seiont runs have collapsed as a result of pollution and now there is a threat from another pumped storage scheme. If NRW allows this, then he believes he has no place at meeting such as today.

JV made a number of comments:-

Referred to roles in river and fish management that Government has given itself. He stated that this was a big encroachment on those who own and use the rivers and denied them the right to manage and enjoy their own assets.

Observed that if government did not wish to undertake stocking programmes he understood and supported this view. However, this should not equate to government subsequently blocking appropriately licenced private sector initiatives in this area.

Gave his view that Government needs to accommodate the overwhelming views of fishery owners, manager and fishermen and make way for the private sector in this respect.

Observed that PG is answerable to constantly changing officials, both elected and non-elected, and that this provided no continuity.

He noted that the requirement to close hatcheries meant that evidence would be found to justify this.

(NRW and EA) need to remain open to other interests including lost habitat and the need to improve fisheries.

He observed that as a landowner he could not cut down trees without permission and implied this as an example of "NRW over-stepping parameters".

JR made a series of observations:-

From the beginning this has not been about consideration of evidence and then taking a decision, but of taking a decision and then seeking evidence to support it.

(The Dee) does not need more habitat, it needs more fish.

Mitigation stocking does not get past the point of predation. He observed that goosanders eat a lot of salmon eggs and inferred that predation is the reason why the return of smolts from Maerdy is only 0.2%.

He observed that a future 100% catch-and-release (C&R) policy would lead to anglers stopping fishing and to a loss of juveniles taking up the sport.

A reversal of the hatchery decision is needed for the benefit of 3rd parties.

He concluded with his view that NRW should be "held to account".

SS presented his views:-

He explained the Wye semi-natural rearing trials, a pilot scheme that included monitoring, had "died" as a result of, and following the NRW decision.

He described the decision (on hatcheries and stocking) as unpopular with fishery owners and users.

He believes that the community does not feel that enough is being done, and that the consultation did not work.

He observed that the presentations from the technical experts today were excellent and gave his opinion that, whilst they did not demonstrate harm from hatcheries, they were needed earlier to add to the consultation.

He explained that there had been an online petition on the subject of stocking in the Wye and that 800 people, 500 of whom don't live near the Wye, had signed this.

He then explained that there had been another petition that means that 33,000 anglers oppose the decision.

SS then handed PG a letter on this subject from Wye Salmon Association (WSA), the Campaign for Protection of Welsh Fisheries (CPWF), the Welsh Salmon & Trout Association (WSTA) and the River Wye Gillies Association (RWGA) registering in the strongest terms their opposition to NRW's decision. He asked for copies of this letter to be passed to NRW's Chairman and Chief executive for their comment.

He continued to set out current and emerging risks for salmon including climate change; tidal lagoons; predation by seals, birds and dolphins; and canoes.

He then gave his view that, given the stockings that had taken place on the Wye since 1974, the recent increase in catch of Wye salmon may be due to stocking progeny but due to the failure to monitor this could not be verified.

He observed that C&R doesn't work and suggested this had been said by Professor Lynda Warren (NRW Board member).

CW then made further points:-

The rate of C&R on the Scottish Dee is 99%, and yet the fishing is disastrous and the stocks have collapsed.

He observed that dolphins are a part of the problem as they have moved away from Spey Bay, and that the district salmon board is now considering opening a hatchery.

He referred to the Spey hatchery and stated that this had not been well run and this was the reason for the trivial return. He also opined that catches of hatchery fish were unreported as anglers did not notice that adipose fins had been removed.

With respect to the Conwy, he stated that canoeing occurs there at a very sensitive time year and that is scatters spawning fish that must be protected.

He stated that NRW is encouraging paddlers during the winter, and that John Griffiths (Welsh Assembly member and Welsh Government Minister for Environment and Sustainable Development) is "pro-canoeist".

PG stated that there had been a salmon tracking programme on the Welsh Dee to look at the potential interactions between canoeing and salmon migration and offered to locate and distribute the report.

JV then made further points:-

Restoration stocking (for the Wye) is the issue.

Expressed the view that "we can't trust you".

Noted there has been a disappearance of large (40lb+) fish caught on the Wye, the very fish for which it was famous

Noted that in the context of a 75% reduction in salmon catch on the Wye, the issue was one of restoration stocking.

PG observed that the Wye salmon stock is not at a reduced level which would trigger a need for "Restoration Stocking". JV asked PG to confirm what this level is. PG confirmed he did not currently have a figure for this but that this was being considered at a National (England and Wales) group and that he would provide feedback in due course.

JV stated that NRW is avoiding their own guidance and not taking account of experience.

JE made these comments:-

With reference to the Dyfi – if harm has been done (by stocking), how good would it have been without stocking?

Stated that he spoke on behalf of the riparian owners and Dolgellau Angling Association and also the Mawddach Trust.

Noted that there are 2 impassable barriers to the east of the catchment.

In 2001 a huge flood stripped all of the gravels in the catchment down to bedrock.

If the Habitats Directive means that stocking in the Eden (a tributary of the Mawddach designated as a Special Area of Conservation) then this is a problem as:-

There is little spawning capacity in the river since several western tributaries have been intercepted to provide water to a leat for the power station (Trawsfynydd), for which there is no mitigation.

In the past, 3 barriers were created to hold back spawning gravels in mitigation for damage, but there are current plans to remove them. Some of the dams that intercept flow in the tributaries can in some circumstances be passed by fish, however the only route downstream for both adults & smolts would take them to Trawsfynydd Lake.

MS made these comments:-

Observed that Tryweryn was the main spawning tributary of the Dee and that there are no more options for habitat improvement.

7. There was a general debate around the suggested topic areas.

CGL noted the history of the understanding of stocking issues:-

1. it took 10-20 years to show and realise that stocking programme should not use stock from other rivers
2. the next realisation related to the escapes of salmon from aquaculture cages, and that fact that these were harmful to wild stocks
3. Now the question is whether hatcheries are acceptable for wild stocks. CGL noted that we are not alone in considering this and that in many other cases stocking is being stopped.

He noted that hatcheries are damaging, and that there is an opportunity to brand all of our stocks and fisheries in Wales a 'natural'.

CGL then said that there are 3 general conclusions:-

- a) stocking does not increase catch or protect populations
- b) unstocked rivers are not worse-off
- c) stocking is inherently risky

CGL made further observations:-

One of the very best places to fish for salmonids currently is the west coast of South America where 80% of rivers now have trout and salmon. The reason for this is the excellent habitat they have – it is not due to stocking because no stocking is undertaken. The salmonids were introduced and have now spread to several East Coast river systems where they are now treated as an invasive species to be removed.

If the Wye salmon population has fallen, what logic is there to say that stocked fish would fare any better?

SS observed that if there was a demonstrably achievable plan (for the Wye) then “we would all agree”. However he noted that no-one has shown them a plan. He concluded with reference to the need for an olive branch and compromise in order to gain a broader acceptance of the way forward:-

CGL stated to JV and others they should consider marketing the Wye as a wholly natural river (i.e. no stocking).

JV pointed out that, as in the case of lowland and upland “wild bird shoots” the two key elements of a wild-only ecosystem for these birds was (i) infrastructure (ii) control of vermin. JV observed unless owners and fishery managers were given more power to control predation on the Wye, it was illogical to assume you could create a habitat supportive of salmon numbers similar to those observed up until the 1980s. You cannot promote a wholly “wild” management strategy without permitting the actions necessary to effect such a strategy. Protection of avian and other predators contradicts a wild management strategy of salmon on the Wye.

NRW stated they would welcome/look at joint academic studies on the Wye but would not support stocking programmes

PG conceded there was no data, but that there is observational information (from the work of Hutton) on where the large spring salmon spawned on the Wye. He did concede it is unlikely they are in the small tributaries given the size of the fish.

8. ME closed the event by thanking all participants, notably those who had travelled some way to attend.

He agreed that a factual note of the meeting would be prepared and circulated to all attendees as a draft, prior to the production of an agreed note of the meeting.