

# Sustainability Committee

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## The Federation of Welsh Anglers

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Tel: 01685 814899  
Virginia Hawkins  
Clerk to the Sustainability Committee  
Welsh Assembly Government  
Cardiff Bay  
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Dear Ms Hawkins,

## Inquiry into Access to Inland Water in Wales

The following is the submission to the inquiry into Access to Inland Water in Wales on behalf of the Federation of Welsh Anglers. The Federation, recognised by Welsh Assembly Government and Sports Council Wales, is the umbrella body for the three national governing bodies for sea, game and coarse fishing in Wales, namely the Welsh Salmon and Trout Angling Association, the Welsh Federation of Sea Anglers and the Welsh Federation of Coarse Anglers.

### Q1. What is your interest in the issue of access to inland waterways

As the national umbrella body for angling in Wales we are obviously greatly interested in the issue of access to our inland waters and keen to ensure the views, interests and rights of angling - anglers, angling clubs and angling organisations receive just consideration and are reflected fairly in this consultation process". "

### Q2. Are you a member of an organisation related to your use of water?

Every angler affiliated to the Federation of Welsh Anglers through their respective national governing bodies is a member of an organisation related to their use of water.

### Q3. Which stretch/es of water do you own/use/manage?

Our anglers own/use/manage waters throughout Wales, the vast majority as members of angling clubs which have either purchased or leased their stretches of river, ponds, lakes or reservoirs, many having entered into long-standing agreements with riparian owners. Leases vary in terms of cost and duration, depending on the nature of the water, its fish species and the type of owner, which may be an individual, such as a farmer, or an organisation, such as a local council or a water company such as Welsh Water, which has an obligation to enable recreational angling and charges for the privilege of so doing, either through running the fishery directly and charging permit fees, or by leasing to angling clubs under strict conditions.

In Wales angling is not elitist, it is very socially inclusive. Much of the fishing on our inland waters is club controlled, making all forms of fishing affordable and accessible to the working man, the cost of most clubs season permits is significantly less than the average season ticket for a Premier League soccer club. Taking Merthyr Tydfil Angling Association as a prime example, Merthyr has around a thousand members and owns or leases miles of river, including some prime salmon beats, some five large reservoirs, some smaller reservoirs and small lakes, for all of which its annual membership fee is just £50.

Obviously, these waters have been acquired over several years through sound investment of funds acquired through membership and good management. Merthyr is not unique, most angling clubs do likewise to varying degrees. It could be argued there is nothing stopping other water sports adopting this model, they have and have had the same opportunities. For those clamouring for free unregulated access to our inland waters, what an injustice this would be to clubs such as Merthyr and what future would there be for such clubs should the likes of some canoeists and canoe organisations get their way? Anglers would expect the same free access, 'what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander', there would be dire implications, not just for the survival and tradition of the clubs themselves, but also for the quality of our fishing in Wales, which attracts many visitors, not to mention the money they inject into the Welsh economy, for incomes for the likes of riparian owners such as farmers, for local rural economies, in general, for the aquatic habitat itself and even for the Environment Agency, through loss of rod licence revenue if anglers were to insist on the same unregulated access as is being demanded in some quarters.

### Q4. Legal Rights

The Federation of Welsh Anglers recognises rights of ownership and that appertaining to rivers above the tidal reach, it is a trespass to go on a river which is in private ownership without the owner's prior permission and we would advise anglers to be respectful of the law. In fairness, this is the position adopted by anglers in general, unfortunately, there are increasing numbers of paddlers intent on ignoring rights of ownership and disregarding the laws of trespass, with the aim of bringing about a change in the laws of the land by blatantly

breaking and disregarding those in existence. It is a dangerous precedent, if others adopt a similar attitude and approach there would soon be a breakdown of society and anarchy would prevail.

These incidents of unlawful access have increased markedly and besides causing a nuisance and disrupting anglers lawful enjoyment of the aquatic environment, are increasingly resulting in conflict, albeit mostly verbal, between paddlers and anglers and between paddlers and landowners, but there is increasing risk of individuals resorting to violence, or even co-ordinated violence on the part of some.

## **Q5. Voluntary Agreements**

The current position of government, both Welsh Assembly and Westminster is to support agreed access through local voluntary access agreements involving all interested parties, landowners/riparian owners, user groups, e.g., anglers and canoeists, even local authorities where relevant. The Federation of Welsh Anglers supports this position, local agreements recognise the rights of landowners and address local requirements and the needs of the respective user groups. Although agreement appertaining to the latter is generally through compromise, it alleviates the conflict which arises through one side seemingly 'having it all' and the other seemingly 'wanting it all', as is the current situation in respect of angling and canoeing.

Unfortunately, this is not the course favoured by the canoeist bodies and, increasingly, long-standing local agreements are being disregarded and there appears almost unilateral refusal by canoeists to form new agreements or replace ones which have expired. Instead, there is an apparent drive to ignore access agreements, disregard rights of ownership and breach laws of trespass, in a bid to pursue a policy of freedom to paddle, a drive which is being supplemented by lobbying and petitioning of government.

As stated, anglers/angling clubs support voluntary agreements, it is the canoeists who are not prepared to sit around the table. We feel government needs to take a lead here and emphasise its stance on voluntary agreements and resolve to bring to an end this current unacceptable and increasingly disharmonious situation which prevails on many of our rivers.

## **Further Comments**

It is important to stress that as an angling body the Federation of Welsh Anglers is not anti-canoeing, we recognise that others have a need to use and enjoy our wonderful water resources for the purpose of recreation.

Whilst recognising this need of other water users, we are greatly concerned at the tactics being adopted by canoeists in particular, to change the status quo and suit their own ends.

Anglers are by means of licence, regulated and accountable, they also have to pay for their fishing, often through membership of angling clubs which have invested heavily in the provision of fishing for their members, either through purchasing or leasing water, which, it must be remembered, is a source of income for landowners, such as farmers, in our rural communities,

Canoeists, on the other hand, are unlicensed, unregulated and unaccountable and determined to pursue what they see as a right of freedom to paddle, and clamour for free and unfettered access, (often with total disregard to environmental sensitivities).

At the Royal Welsh Show the Sustainability Committee heard reports by Prof. Andrew Church of Brighton University and Dr. John Powell, University of Gloucester, referring to their respective studies covering provision of water recreation, access and management of users.

Prof. Church stated the current situation needed remedying and his key conclusion was that any remedy would encompass a number of approaches, including voluntary agreements, legislation and purchase of land.

Dr Powell referred to the need to resolve the problem of access and then the need for management of users, stating that one approach will not work everywhere: 'You need a toolbox of techniques that you can call on and adapt to the local conditions.'

The general conclusion appeared to be that there was no one simple solution to the problem of access and use and that any solution would need to incorporate a range of strategies, however, there was a strong emphasis on local requirements and voluntary agreements, both academics recognised they are a major strategy and could be effective and sustainable when negotiated at a local level.

There is need for an equitable solution to the present unacceptable situation, this is most likely to be achieved at a local level as requirements will differ from locality to locality, which re-emphasises our position of supporting local voluntary agreements. Anglers have every right to claim the moral high ground in this argument, recognising rights of ownership, respecting the law, being licensed and paying for their fishing, purchasing or leasing water, etc., and have every right to feel aggrieved at the canoeists tactics, and especially so should they get their way, as would landowners also feel aggrieved, yet anglers, angling clubs and riparian owners, appear willing to sit around the table at local level and formulate local voluntary agreements, canoeists do not.

Finally and importantly, the implications should canoeists get their way are quite serious on several counts:

- For society in general - when a body of people can bring about a change in the law by wilfully breaking existing ones is encouragement for others to do the same, the result is anarchy.
- For angling - free unfettered access will result in the ruination of much of the fishing on our rivers, particularly for salmon and sea trout, for which Wales is renowned, even possibly damaging fish stocks with disturbance to fish spawning. (Wales differs greatly from Scotland in that our rivers are smaller and we are much more accessible to the great English conurbations which are on our doorstep).

Angling clubs will suffer and many will cease to exist, not just through the decline in quality of fishing but if canoeists have free access anglers, a much larger body of people, will demand the same, many have already asked the question why should they pay to fish or pay for rod licences if the canoeists have everything for free? Which also has implications for the Environment Agency and again for angling, in respect of the benefits it receives from the Environment Agency. (In Scotland anglers do not have to purchase rod licences, a fact which has not gone unnoticed by some in Wales.)

- For the economy - would the loss in angling revenue, through fishing, tackle sales, etc., and through angling tourism be made up through an increase in revenue from canoeing? Certainly not if reports on canoeist spend on their visits are true and particularly in respect of local rural economies, where landowners/riparian owners/angling clubs will not just lose out on loss of income from anglers but also suffer substantial falls in respect of value to property, land and fishing rights.

- For government - freedom of access will mean that someone has to compensate landowners, angling clubs, etc., for loss of income and decline in value of assets.

I hope the above is of value and will assist in the Sustainability Committee reaching its conclusions.

Yours sincerely,

Chris Bond

Angling Development Manager

Federation of Welsh Anglers