

National Assembly for Wales
Environment and Sustainability Committee
NRW 2015 – 36
Natural Resources Wales – Annual Scrutiny 2015
Response from Rodney Byles

- 1. Introduction:** I live in England and have been fishing the river Towy for sewin primarily at night at Llangadog for about 30 years. I make several 400 mile round trips to the river each season and in the process have probably spent a small fortune in the Towy Valley. That has been my choice. However, as a 'Towy angling tourist' it is difficult to see how this can be sustained, if the dramatic decline in sewin over recent years continues on an unabated downward spiral.
- 2.** Many other 'angling tourist' colleagues, and some that fortunately live closer to the Towy, have voiced similar concerns to me and despair at the apparent lack of action to stem the decline of this once great sewin river. Towy angling clubs will suffer from decreasing membership, as disgruntled and disillusioned anglers leave to possibly pursue angling opportunities elsewhere. Some clubs may not be able to survive and local authorities and riparian owners could also suffer from reduced fishery rental income. In addition, hotels, B&Bs, shops and other angling business interests in the Towy Valley will be adversely affected.
- 3.** In all the years that I have fished the Towy I have yet to see, let alone meet an EA/NRW bailiff. I do not know any of my colleagues who have seen one either, but that is perhaps not surprising, as I believe there is only one to cover and police the river's catchment. I wonder how many night patrols there were on the river last season and how many planned for the coming one.
- 4.** The lack of policing the Towy catchment also appears to be a policy mirrored in the estuary. I have heard from several knowledgeable local anglers of illegal netting in the estuary and adjacent coastal areas. I understand much of this illegal activity is from opportunist poachers and boats coming across the Bristol Channel from Devon and elsewhere.
- 5.** This illegality has possibly been encouraged by the likelihood of culprits knowing they are unlikely to be caught due to the lack of day and or night patrols. But I understand the estuary and coastal

areas are under the jurisdiction of WAG and not the NRW. This illegal netting is a vital issue and a great cause for concern amongst anglers and one in which WAG needs to focus its urgent attention. Many anglers I have spoken to believe the illegal netting is one, if not the major factor contributing to the decline in sewin in the Towy. No amount of habitat work and other conservation measures in the river will be of any benefit if the fish are being prevented from entering the river in the first place.

6. In recent seasons, as the numbers of sewin have declined, an increasing number of responsible fellow Towy anglers I know have practised voluntary catch and release. This policy has since been adopted by many Clubs, each with their own specific rules. In my view the NRW should be encouraging all Clubs and private beats to adopt a common catch and release policy for the whole river, and I do not mean mandatory catch and release. Most Clubs, I believe, insist on all sewin over about 8lb be released.
7. These larger fish, predominantly hens, which are being returned by responsible rod anglers, could theoretically be caught by the legal nets in future seasons. Just over 13% of the declared 1088 sewin killed by the legal coracle and seine nets last season were greater than 8lb. The sewin culling season for the nets has to be drastically and responsibly reduced while the sewin numbers are in dramatic decline. With Towy sewin at risk it is, in my opinion, totally irresponsible to currently allow the nets to catch as many sewin as they like without a fixed quota system.
8. The NRW is supposed to be the guardian and custodian of the Towy for the current and future generations. However, judging by the apparent lack of action to stem the decline of sewin in the river, the organisation does not currently appear to be fulfilling its obligation. Similarly WAG needs to equally contribute to increase the numbers of sewin entering the river and focus on improving the situation with eradicating illegal netting in the estuary and surrounding coastal areas.
9. The response to two issues that I raised directly with the NRW and the former EA, have not inspired me with confidence. In 2013 a farmer drove an excavator into the Towy near Manordeilo, and without NRW approval, removed a snag that had been there for many years, creating two heaps of excavated shingle and totally changed the tail of the pool. At the same time a considerable amount of concrete waste was illegally dumped by the farmer in

several locations along the river bank in this area of Special Scientific Interest. See photos. The NRW was informed and in return an NRW officer later indicated that all the rubble would be removed after the spawning season. The same NRW officer subsequently advised that all the rubble had been removed, even though it had not. The NRW officer was told of this false information, only for the same NRW officer to then completely change his original response, and said that removing the rubble could cause more damage than the initial dumping. This, to me, indicated total confusion within the NRW and was, in my opinion, a ludicrous and illogical conclusion. The absurd decision will provide a green light for other farmers to similarly dump waste into the river, rather than deter any future episodes.

10. In a similar incident several seasons back, and a few hundred metres downstream on the opposite bank from the event described in paragraph 9, a farmer had been excavating shingle at the water's edge over a considerable period. Over time the river broke through to create a new bypass channel taking flow from the main river and can be clearly seen on Google Maps. In high flows it was impossible to cross this by pass channel to get to the pools on the main river. The then EA was advised of this excavation and was followed by an EA site inspection. The then EA officer (now with the NRW and also an angler) declared the new channel was caused by natural erosion. In my opinion this defied logic and was an insult.

Judging by the comments I have heard from other far more knowledgeable anglers, and my own my limited experience as an 'angling tourist', it is debateable whether the NRW is currently safeguarding the natural resources of Wales.



Rubble dumped below Crewil Pool near Manordeilo



