

National Assembly for Wales
Environment and Sustainability Committee
NRW 2015 – 49
Natural Resources Wales – Annual Scrutiny 2015
Response from Leighton Rees

I welcome the opportunity to comment on the NRW from my own experience as an angler.

Having fished on the Rivers Amman, Loughor & Towy for almost 20 years & have seen a noticeable decline in the number of migratory fish in those rivers, especially in the last 6-8 years. This undoubtedly is a common theme amongst other anglers too.

As a young lad growing up I remember being taken down to the river side to watch leaping salmon and sea trout on the river Amman, a real treat and am convinced that it's from here my passion for fishing for these great fish arose. There seemed to be an abundance of fish back then, even with the mines still working. However these days, I regularly speak to older generation who cannot believe the state on our rivers from a fish stock point of view.

I find it frustrating that for several factors that our fish stocks are being decimated and not looked after as they should – surely the NRW should be doing this on our behalf? I am paid for doing a job and if I did not perform then I'm sure I would have some consequences to face!

I feel that the NRW should ensure that they have the resources and determination to address several issues that I believe are a factor in our migratory fish being exposed, do the NRW realise how important that these fish are? The revenue from visiting anglers to the Towy, Teifi & Dovey bring in Millions of pounds to the rural economy and also have the hidden knock on benefits of returning visitors, B&B, local pubs and shops, fishing tackle shops all benefiting from the desire for people to fish for these magnificent fish.

The concerns I have, are as follows;

- **Poaching:** It is well known that there are a number of illegally operated nets being used in Carmarthen bay and the Burry Inlet. These illegal nets are just left to get on with it and take what they want, not policed in any way at all. I know of several people who have alerted the NRW to suspicious or known netting – what was done about it? Nothing. We cannot put figures to the numbers of fish that these nets are taking, but can all use common sense to see what damage this activity is doing to our fish stocks. This needs to be stopped and more stringent measures put in place to police this. These gangs need to be prosecuted and made examples of to make the others think of the consequences.

There is also the issue of poaching or illegal fishing within the river systems / headwaters, there seems to be occasions every year where there are reports of poaching activities on the rivers, from those fishing with no licences with rod and line to the serious poachers taking fish for selling on. Most of the fish taken are during the tail end of the season when these fish are ready for spawning. How much resource is allocated to policing our rivers? I cannot remember the last time I was asked by a Bailiff to see my licence. Again, this needs to be policed and examples made of people in the form of prosecutions.

- **Legal Nets:** A large number of large migratory fish, mainly Sewin are taken by the nets men on the Towy prior to the fishing season (rod and line) commencing, in my opinion these fish are the large early season fish that run the river – prime breeding stock that should reach the spawning grounds to spawn and produce our future stocks. I'm sure that the nets men will speak of their heritage and traditions dating back to their great grandfathers, but in essence they are only after the best price for the fish they are harvesting from the river. Surely this situation needs to be looked at. The fishing community brought about a buy out some years ago, this needs to be looked at and instigated by the NRW.
- **Fish Eating Birds;** it is evident that the number of Goosanders and Cormorants that are seen on our rivers in the last 5 years has dramatically increased. Common sense tells any man that if the number of FEBS is on the increase, they need and will take more food to sustain this population growth – what are they eating? Yes juvenile fish.
Fishing associations / clubs and other interested parties are pushing for a licence for culling FEBS, again, the NRW are not on board with this issue. So our fish stocks are being impacted by poaching, nets men and FEB's– what hope do we have? NRW need to be on board with controlling FEB's
- **Pollution;** I personally feel that a lot more could be done by the NRW in a proactive manner for dealing with pollution of our watercourses from industrial / construction sources. A difficult one to police, but educating companies would certainly help.
- **Maintenance / Protection Works:** Could more be done by the NRW to ensure our rivers are well maintained and provide a suitable habitat for our fish.
River banks are naturally eroded, but a little fore thought and planning could prevent a lot of large scale damage, the siltation from erosion has many effects on aquatic life and our fish. Other factors that can effect erosion is debris / blockages in the river channel, fallen trees and snags have an effect on the hydrology of a watercourse, this causes erosion issues. Could more be done by the NRW to be more proactive with these issues and deal with them before they become an issue?
Again another influence beyond the fisherman's control.
- **Agriculture;** I personally think that more should be done by the NRW to work with our Farmers and assist in reducing the number of pollution incidents from agricultural sources. Education and collaboration would go a long way in reducing these incidents such as slurry spills, pesticides, etc. the use of pesticides and their effects on water courses and aquatic life are again an effect on the health of our rivers. We must also consider the effects of run off from the land entering our rivers – in 2014 it was reported that 2.2 Million tonnes of top soil was lost by erosion in the UK, where does this end up being deposited? Mitigating measures must be put in place, margin strips around watercourses etc.
- **Fish Passes etc.;** I also believe that more could be done to open up more of our headwaters to spawning fish, removing obstacles and providing easier passage to our migratory fish. Bodies such as they Wye Usk Foundation have made inroads in to this, yes they're funded and work with the NRW / EA but surely NRW should be the driving force here?
- **Stocking:** it amazes me that last year it was announced that a number of hatcheries would be closed – in a time when our stocks are at a very low state – what a decision! There is solid

evidence that stocking / hatcheries have made significant improvements to rivers around the world, but NRW close our hatcheries. Surely this decision needs to be reviewed for the benefit of our future fish stocks and the income generated by angling.

- **Catch and Release;** Most angling associations have now brought in C&R rules and encourage the larger sewin over 26" to be returned for spawning – a brilliant idea that shows commitment and looking to protect our stocks. There are also the restrictions on the number of fish that can be taken in a session or season. However, the poachers and nets are taking whatever they feel like taking for their own benefit. We anglers are the ones that pay our licence fee and association permits annually, are told how many fish of what size we can keep and encouraged to return fish to the river – all for the damage to be done by others that are not controlled.

It's fair to say that there is plenty of evidence out there that should make the NRW stand up and address these issues.

Other countries around the world have transformed their fishing by making changes for the good; there is no reason why Wales cannot be up there with countries such as Patagonia and Norway when it comes to world class fishing for migratory fish.

Regards,

Leighton Rees