

STOCKING – THE REVOLUTION WILL NOT BE TELEVISED

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Whilst I think the term “angling politics” should be more oxymoron than actuality, the truth is our sport is as fogged by confusion and as engaged in petty wars and territorial skirmishes as every other sport. I have learned this since I retired in 2012 and became actively involved in the Angling Trust, chairing meetings about stuff I’d not heard of when I still had a day job. Riveting things like The EU Water Framework Directive (or WFD as we cognoscenti term it), macrophytes and microphytes (me neither) and, increasingly, the Environment Agency’s National Trout and Grayling Fisheries Strategy. I had heard of triploid trout but I hadn’t wasted too much time angling about them until I attended a meeting organised by the Salmon and Trout Association at which I learned that triploids were apparently the Great Satan and the end of river fishing as we knew it. Who knew? Meeting followed meeting, I rambled on a bit, perhaps quite a lot, and before I knew it John Cheyne from the Trust had invited me to give a talk about my own thoughts on The Great Stocking Question. So what follows

is what I said – more or less, as I went a little off piste then, and I won’t resist the temptation to do the same now.

I live and fish in North Yorkshire; I’ve been a coarse angler for 50 years and a game angler for over 40. My first love is fly fishing for trout on the becks and rivers of the Dales and Moors but winter chub and pike are still a passion. I am not a scientist – before I retired I was a lawyer – and I am not here to dictate any particular approach to stocking but I do want to share some of my own experiences which I have gleaned from being involved with a variety of clubs and syndicates as well as spending about 150 days a year on the riverbank.

I am lucky to have access to club records, some of which go back to the 19th century. I also have my own diaries dating back to 1975 and what I have learned is this – sometimes stocking is an expensive folly and in other cases stocking is the only show in town. I am going to suggest that if you run a fishing club or syndicate, you might do what many of us have done, which is to take a long hard think about your own water and decide what is best for you in 2015 and

beyond. Because in many cases what was right for you in the last century may be wrong for you in this one, and here’s why...

I bet you £10 you haven’t killed a river trout this year. I’m right, aren’t I? And I bet you can’t even remember when you last killed one either. (I asked this question at the Angling Trust meeting in Darlington when this talk was given. Despite the fact that stocking was the main subject matter of the day not a single hand was raised.)

I ask you this because when I started catching river trout in the 70s I did the same as you all did – I cracked any sizeable trout over the head. It felt like some atavistic ritual and what was so curious is that although I took care to look after the carp and barbel I caught, I so readily turned into an assassin when I caught fish that tasted as good as trout. But my priest hasn’t seen much action for many years and I bet the same applies to yours, too; but why have things changed quite so much? It’s got to be more than cheap rainbows from Morrisons, hasn’t it? I think it’s a lot more, and prominent in the list of reasons are massively increased environmental

awareness, the emergence of a new breed of river angler with new ideas and techniques, the creation of the Wild Trout Trust and, most of all, the fact that river trout fishing is now seen as sexy and exciting by many anglers, thanks to the enthusiasm of people like Paul Procter and Jon Beer. It used to be something your tweedy Latin teacher did on his holidays in Derbyshire but now it is the cool thing about which a cool writer like John Gierach writes his Hemingway-esque prose. And look – I don’t mind if you knock a trout on the head now and again but just don’t try that tired old argument with me about how to kill is to justify our sport. I’m a coarse angler, too, and if some want to accuse me of using fish as organic playthings they’re probably right. But I’ll accuse the exclusively catch and kill brigade of just wanting to play at being cavemen – that is when they’re not sipping their gin and tonics in the clubhouse.

Fly fishing became popular in the 19th century but until the latter part of the last century trout were often seen as just another crop to be harvested; you chucked them in your river in April and by September only a few would remain. So we caught big bags in spring and progressively smaller ones as the summer wore on because – surprise, surprise – there was a diminishing supply of fish. We weren’t too fussed about whatever else lived in the river because for decades trout fisheries were run just the same as some big pheasant shoots; they were heavily stocked and to hell with environmental diversity. We couldn’t even spell ecology, let alone tell you what it meant, and we stocked because we’d always stocked because that’s what the constitution said we did. Mind you, it had been written pre- First World War and it did still talk about the right of the keeper to inspect a gentleman’s pannier. As if.

But that was then and this is now and in 2015 most of us recognise wild fish as an asset and most of us return most of what we catch. So why aren’t we reacting quickly enough, or in many cases at all, to what a sociologist would call a paradigm shift? (We speak of little else round here.)

Let me tell you about the River Rye. My club has 12 miles of this river which rises on the North York Moors and which is blessed with a population of exclusively wild fish, and sometimes very big ones too. Trout run from three or four to the pound in the upper waters to 4lb-plus each in the lower, but we don’t shout too loudly about it as you’ll all be wanting to join. We fish for about 400 – 500 days a year and in a good season catch 2,000 fish and

in a bad one 600. We are ultra strict about records and returns and we have these going back to 1868. So here are some statistics: in 2000 we killed 228 trout; in 2005 we only killed 53; and in 2013 only 11. Something is going on here and it’s happening all over the UK.

Because of the sea change in our sport, I think the time is right for those of us who still stock to take another look at why we do so and find out if it’s still the right answer to the right question. Because, whereas we used to kill our limit of two brace so as to impress our wives and girlfriends, we now return nearly every fish we catch and we have to take our partners for expensive meals out instead.

What’s to be done then? Let me give you a couple of examples as food for thought. The Cod Beck is a tributary of the Swale with a catchment on the western edge of the North York Moors. It is that rarest of gems – an English lowland trout stream with a good mayfly hatch and fish to 3lb-plus. I have fished the Beck for 30 years and for the first 20 years I caught a lot of wildies and a fair amount of stockies, too. Two or three clubs control most of the Beck’s 15 miles and we stocked because we always had done so. But in the late 90s some of us started wondering why we were stocking at all, given the number of wild fish there seemed to be. The WTT and our good friends at Orvis helped us with a survey and they confirmed that we had a damned good trout stream which was capable of being self sustaining. One club

now doesn’t stock at all and the others have reduced stocking to every year or so and I think even that is too often. And guess what? Catches are up and the wild fish are taking the opportunity which less competition from stock fish has offered. They are fat, healthy and offer wonderful sport as they fight harder and smarter than any stockie ever did. But why did we never think it through

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before? What effect did we imagine introducing several hundredweight of alien fish to the river had on its existing stocks of fish and the food which supported them? It was never going to end well for

the indigenous fish, so what on earth were we playing at?

But managing the change hasn’t always been easy as many of the old guard were totally resistant to any change from what they had known before. Specious arguments would be advanced – “the landlords expect it” (the same landlords who had never shown any interest in the river apart from the rent it produced); “we are paying our subs and we want to get a return” (you will, you’ll catch more fish) and “the fish are too hard now, we can’t catch them on 8lb Maxima leaders any more” (that’s because we are no longer at home to Mr. Stockie Basher so you’d better learn to fish properly). The numbers so often tell us a very different story, but every fishing club still has the bunch of old buggers who sit chuntering at the back, reminiscing about their long lost youth and its never-never land of rivers full of rising trout and blizzards of mayfly. I won’t see 60 again but my own records show a rather bleaker past. In many cases things are as good now as they ever have been on my rivers, and that isn’t anecdote but fact. I grew up in the industrial wasteland of the West Riding in the 1960s and the nearest river which supported any life at all was 20 miles away. The Aire flowed five minutes from my home but it was devoid of life. All life. No fish, no birds, no insects, no trees and no mammals. Nothing. But I walked down there a few months ago and I saw tree-lined banks, kingfishers and wagtails, and the surface was scoured with the rises of dace and roach.

Let me talk now about the River Tees in County Durham. A friend of mine owns a couple of miles or so of this most beautiful of Dales rivers and a few years ago he decided to stock for the first time. He ran a fairly exclusive syndicate and felt that his members would like some bigger trout to catch in addition to



the good population of native trout present. My friend decided that a few hundred triploid trout, big ones of 2lb-plus, would be stocked to spice things up. But it didn't work – few of the stock fish were caught, fewer still over-wintered and overall catch rates worsened. It appeared as though fewer wild fish were being caught and their average size was poor. After five years, stocking was abandoned. Result? More fish are being caught, a four-figure sum is being saved annually and the subs have been reduced. I would call that a win-win.

I could give you more examples from the Witham to the Leven but I won't as in all the cases I'm aware of, where stocking has been reduced or stopped altogether, this has resulted in better fish and better fishing. So it's really that simple then – stop stocking and all will be well. If only.

This is very far from being a one size fits all solution because a no-stocking strategy simply will not work on some rivers. So let's nip back to the Swale. Our stretch has a tiny population of wild trout but excellent stocks of chub, grayling and barbel. We can't do any habitat work as it would be destroyed by the 5m floods we get every winter. This bit of the river has no real business pretending to be a trout water, much as I love to fish there. The problem is that this part of the Swale is far more suitable for coarse fish and it's only a trout water because we make it one by stocking heavily. Our club was created in the days when people wouldn't let inconvenient environmental truths get in their way; why should they when unsuitable habitat could just be ignored by piling in the stockies? But it's a policy which works pretty well even though the fish don't fight half as hard as wild fish, they don't over-winter well (or often at all) and they cost us £4,500 every year. Oddly enough, the winter pike fishing can be very good. You can guess why.

So here we have a club, by no means unique I'm sure, which would cease to exist if stocking were discontinued and which throws a lot of money at creating a fair trout fishery on a good barbel river. We wouldn't start from this point now but we are stuck with it and, like everybody else, we will be buying triploids in the future. Am I worried? Not really. Although I will commit a heresy and say that there seems to me to be almost as much logic in stocking rainbows as there is in stocking sterile brownies – they're cheaper and if it goes wrong they'll all be dead in four years anyway. I once ventured this view on a fishing web forum and as

far as I know I am still subject to a fatwa for uttering an unsayable heresy. Infamy, infamy, they've all got it in for me...

I have caught triploids and to be quite honest I haven't noticed any real difference in behaviour from diploids. I remain convinced that the biggest factor in whether fish are 'free risers' (whatever that really means) is the fish's habitat and not its genetic makeup. If the food is on the top, the fish will take it and if it isn't then they won't. The Swale's trout and grayling are very free risers indeed, I suspect because they rely more on terrestrial insects than they would do so on a river with richer invertebrate

life. In contrast, the Rye is astonishingly rich – it isn't unusual for a two-minute kick sample to produce a thousand-plus nymphs. You'd be lucky to get a 20th of that number on the Swale. So with all those bugs hatching into flies you get free rising fish everywhere, right? Not on the Rye you don't. On the

lower parts of our water you can be lucky to see 10 fish rise all day. I think the reason is simply this – why go upstairs when there's food downstairs? Result – dry fly catches 90 per cent of my Swale fish but fewer than 20 per cent of my Rye fish. Conclusion? Unscientific, yes, but my records show that some rivers will produce a lot of trout even though the fish rarely rise and others will produce lots of trout which will ignore a spider or a nymph but will take a dry fly with relish. I don't know what will happen when we exclusively stock with triploids in the Swale – will they feed on the bottom and confirm the stories that they don't rise? And, God forbid, if we ever put them in

the Rye (over my dead body), would they stay grazing on the bottom like everything else does most of the year? I don't know the answer to either question but what I do know is this – if your river is capable of supporting a self sustaining population of wild trout, then don't mess them around with daft stockies to compete with; give them a chance, encourage catch and release and get better sport for less money.

You might not agree with me and I would be wasting my time if my preaching was solely to the converted – but let me finish by asking you a question. Are you stocking because that's what you've always done? Think about what has worked on many but not all of my waters, and then think about whether it can work for you, too. You can only make an informed decision if, indeed, it is informed. If you do not have access to decent data then your first challenge is to get your members to properly record their catches – without accurate returns you will be lost in a mire of anecdote and rumour. Fishing has always fallen victim to the lazy convenience of *ex post facto* explanations, glib conspiracy theories and homespun custom and practice. And far too many fishermen love to turn uninformed speculation into accepted dogma whilst refusing to make even an attempt at recording their catches properly. Your older club members may need some prodding to change their ways but once you've got the information then trust the numbers, analyse the data from your returns and make your decisions based on logic, not tradition or rumour.

Changing a stocking policy is not always the easiest journey to make and you will certainly encounter some bumpy roads *en route*, but if you do it for the right reasons, and on the right water, it can transform your fishery and save you money in the process – and who can argue with that as an outcome? 🐟

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