

Case Study: Denbigh & Clwyd Angling Club's decision to cease stocking.

Background:

The club (www.denbighandelwydac.org.uk), which has fishing on approximately 15 miles of the Afon Clwyd and its tributaries in north east Wales, had been stocking some of the beats it controls on the river annually for many years. Stocking took place twice a year; the first, in early season and the second in late May. The number of fish released at each stocking was 500. Latterly, stocking took place over a three mile length of Afon Clwyd. All fish introduced were brown trout weighing between ¾lb and 1lb.

During the last few seasons before the decision to cease stocking was made at the end of the 2010 season, the annual cost to the club was in the region of £1,200. The 500 fish per stocking was an arbitrary figure decided by the club's committee and based on stocking totals in previous years. The main purpose of stocking was to provide takeable size fish for members to catch rather than to strategically improve the quality of fishing in the river. No professional advice was sought about the ideal number of fish to be released in relation to the length of river or suitability of habitat to accommodate that number of fish. Only during the last two years of stocking were the stock fish marked with a blue dot to distinguish them from the wild stock.

Following the marking of the fish, returns from members indicated that only about 5% of the stock fish were being caught and the club concluded that members who submitted catch returns weren't recording the number of stock fish caught or that the remaining 95% were being lost. The possible reasons for stock loss identified by the club included over-stocking, and/or unfavourable habitat resulting in loss to stretches of the river not controlled by the club, natural predation and unauthorised fishing by non-members.

Making the decision to cease stocking:

Based on the annual cost of stocking and the low number of stock fish recorded as caught each season, the committee concluded that stocking was not a good use of club funds. It therefore decided to seek the views of members about whether or not to continue stocking and included the question on the agenda for discussion at the club's 2010 AGM. It also included a recommendation that all stocking should cease after the 2010 season and at the meeting quoted the following reasons for its recommendation:

- That based on stock fish catch returns, the cost of stocking was not good use of club funds;
- over-stocking and/or unfavourable habitat was resulting in stock fish loss to sections of the river not controlled by the club;
- the possibility that the larger and more dominant stock fish were eating food the smaller wild trout relied on to grow, were predated the smaller wild trout and possibly even driving the latter to other sections of the river not controlled by the club;
- the possibly damaging long-term effects on the genetic purity of the native wild brown trout population as a result of inter-breeding with stock fish.

Another factor that influenced the club's decision to recommend that stocking should cease was the plan implemented by the Monnow Fisheries Association to increase the number of wild trout in the River Monnow, a tributary of the River Wye. This involved marking stock fish, asking members to only retain marked fish and reducing the number of fish stocked each year as catch returns showed that the number of released wild fish was increasing. The deciding factor though was the proposal announced by Environment Agency Wales in 2008 that it intended to introduce regulations that would prohibit the stocking of rivers with fertile hatchery-bred trout in 2015.

Acceptance of the recommendation to cease stocking the river made at the 2010 AGM was all but unanimous and there weren't any recorded resignations or members who did not renew membership the following season stating the cessation of stocking as the reason for this.

Developments since stocking ceased:

Once the decision to cease stocking had been made and with the approval of members, the club introduced a voluntary catch and release policy and urged members to fish with barbless hooks.

Some minor habitat improvement work was carried out on sections of the Afon Clwyd to improve conditions for the wild brown trout. Most of the club's efforts though were focused on improving the habitat and access to an important feeder stream entering the river on one of the beats it controlled, that once provided ideal spawning ground for wild brown trout and migratory fish but which had deteriorated due to lack of maintenance. Other than that, it was decided to leave everything else to nature and ask members to monitor the situation and report any difference they noticed in the increase in the number and size of wild brown trout seen and caught in comparison to previous years when stock fish were present. No scientific method of doing this was suggested and members were asked to base their observations purely on their own personal opinion.



Members of the Denbigh & Clwyd Angling Club carrying out habitat improvement work on a tributary of the River Clwyd

As expected, little or no changes were



A Clwyd wild brown trout

scientific evidence, the club is confident that there is sufficient evidence to show that improvements are taking place and that the decision to cease stocking was a wise decision for the future of the river and its wild trout population. Another benefit to the club as a result of its decision to cease stocking is that it has now reduced its annual expenditure by £1,200, based on 2010 stocking costs, which it can now invest in other ways to benefit its members.

seen during the 2011 season. During the 2012 and 2013 seasons though, members started to report seeing and catching more wild fish than they had done previously when stock fish were present and that the average size of the fish caught appeared to be increasing. Reports so far during the 2014 season suggest that this trend is continuing.

Conclusions:

There is now some regret that advice wasn't sought when deciding the method to be used to monitor changes following the decision to cease stocking. Although developments relating to the wild trout population reported since stocking ceased are based only on the personal opinion of members rather than