



Case Study: Leek and District Fly Fishing Association decision to cease stocking.

Background:

Ladffa has fishing on approximately 3 miles of the river Dove, a limestone freestone river running through the Dovedale valley in the Derbyshire Peak District with Ladffa holding the fishing rights since the late 1970's.

The river has been traditionally stocked on an annual basis from that time and before, with fish from a local fish farm at around 1lb plus. At that time stocking was seen as an aide to the anglers catch and was the norm for many fisheries up and down the country with Ladffa no exception to this ethos. Stocking took place twice a year; the first, in early season and the second in late May usually following the Mayfly. The number of fish released at each stocking in the early days, was around 350+ with that reducing to around 250 during the latter years. During the last few seasons the annual cost to the Association was in the region of £1,300.

The fish numbers per stocking was a figure decided by the club's committee, based on stocking totals in previous years, advice from the Environment Agency about the ideal number of fish to be released in relation to the length of river, where they were to be introduced and suitability of habitat to accommodate that number of fish. In later years the fish introduced were triploids to prevent the weakening of the genetic base of the natural fish stocks.

The stocked fish were monitored in various ways either with numbered eye tags or marked with a blue dot, with two blue dots being used the following year to identify overwintered fish, to distinguish them from the wild fish and also to identify them from our upstream neighbour, who also stocked. Members were issued with cards showing various beats along the river and the marked fish that were caught were recorded either by the tag number or the blue spot mark and in which section of the river they were caught.

Returns indicated that around 60% of the members' catches were marked fish and that only 2% of the stocked fish overwintered. The furthest reported tagged fish was recorded below Nottingham some 30 miles away in the river Trent. The occasional brace of stocked fish were also allowed to be removed from the river by the members although catch returns showed that only a minimal number of fish were taken.

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:

A decision by the Environment Agency not to give Ladffa a licence to stock the river with fish from the local fish farm due to the presence there of the American signal crayfish (and a potential threat of crayfish plague being transferred) meant that another source of fish was required. The nearest source of triploid brown trout was, at that time, in Dorset which involved a trip of several hours and considerable distance for the fish.

Due to the additional cost of this exercise, the lessening of affordable numbers of stocked fish, and the welfare issue of the fish travelling such distances, the committee concluded that this scenario was unsustainable and it was decided to seek the views of members about whether or not to continue stocking.

A voting form was issued to all the membership with "arguments for and against". Voting took place and with a mandate from the membership not to stock for an initial "trial" period of three years stocking ceased and a catch and release policy was applied.



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Two memberships were known to have been lost directly from this decision, the following season.

Developments since stocking ceased:

A great deal of habitat improvement work has been carried along the river over the years with a “traditional” method of debris removal, tree pruning and general bank and river “tidies”. Today this work continues but in a vastly different way with major works, tree felling creating large woody debris and putting wood back into the river, a rather alien experience for some of the more “senior” members. All this work has been with the assistance from the Wild Trout Trust, National Trust, Environment Agency and various other bodies. As part of this work and to try to gauge the pros and cons of weir removal, a single weir was removed and the effects monitored by the local university which is still ongoing. Initial indications show faster flows through the area with gravelly runs developing to perhaps accommodate redds.

The first season after non stocking, little changed and the occasional overwintered fish was being caught and some wild fish were being reported albeit around the 6-8 inch mark. The next season saw an explosion of juvenile wild fish again in the 6-8 inch class but of excellent quality. The latest season has produced some remarkable wild fish up to and beyond the size of the previously stocked fish but of superior quality.

The Grayling population has always been well represented, with the occasional fish in the 1.5 -2lb class, even when stocked fish were introduced. These larger fish however didn't last long and when they disappeared the smaller fish took their place. For two seasons now reports of 2lb plus Grayling are common and also the juvenile fish are present as well. The current reports indicate this trend is continuing.

A non-stocking policy brings a ‘duty of care’ for our members to be mindful of angling pressure and the importance of handling and releasing of fish correctly.

This year (2014) sees the end of the three year trial period of non-stocking and the question of stocking being put to the membership for their vote. The membership as with many Associations has been fluid and for many members stocking has never been an issue.

The committee will be recommending a vote not to stock the river.

Conclusions:

As a progressive Association, the benefit our online forums and catch return policies provide is that we receive real time information that allows us to make informed and timely decisions. Consolidating this information, including the average catch returns for the trial period it is clear that the policy to cease stocking has been a success. We trust that the trend of improvement prevails but can't ignore that is a continual process, and the Association's commitment to improving the habitat of our quarry is eternal.

Should the membership agree with the committee and vote not to stock then along with our partners the maintenance of the river and its fauna and flora will be even more important to the well-being of the environment needed to support a wild fish population.

Ladffa July 2014