

Angling & Fisheries Summit: 25 January 2011

Note of Meeting

Chair: Nigel Gooding

Attendees and organisations represented - see Annex A

1. Opening Address by Richard Benyon, Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Natural Environment and Fisheries

The Minister hoped that this meeting would be the start of a regular dialogue with all present. He stressed the social and economic value of freshwater and sea angling and in particular the benefits it brings to rural and coastal communities and how it provides access for 3 million people. He also pointed out that anglers were both beneficiaries and benefactors of the natural environment.

The Minister set out the Governments policy and how grateful he was for responses to the Natural Environment White Paper (NEWP), which would be an important development for the Department and set a framework for how we use water and manage our resources. He also stressed his commitment to delivery of proposed new salmon and freshwater fisheries legislation.

He noted the positive link of sea angling to tourism and was grateful for sea anglers enthusiasm for IFCA's and how vital it was for them to get involved with MCZ's.

He welcomed the positive contribution that the angling and fisheries bodies make, noting that it was often unpaid and unsung. He stressed the importance of fish stocks being managed on a sustainable basis and noted that while there were problems, it was important that we did not forget the positives. With the number of rod licences issued up over the decade and the increase in coarse fish numbers, the future for anglers and fish was good.

The Minister announced a review of the current licensing policy for cormorants, adding that any decisions must be science and evidence based.

Finally, he looked forward to the next summit in March, which he hoped would improve collaboration and develop a sense of partnership.

2. Recreational Sea Angling (RSA)

David Mitchell voiced concern about Governments lack of recognition, over many decades, of the socio-economic value of RSA in relation to sea fisheries management measures. He believed Defra had underestimated the challenge of engaging sea anglers and getting them to participate in their proposed study into sea angling catches. He felt that unambiguous assurances were needed that this work would help to enhance the status of RSA.

Alan Brown outlined the socio economic value of RSA and Mark Lloyd noted that there would be suspicion surrounding the study and that the intent was important. The benefits for sea anglers should be made clear so that AT could sell this to their

members; this request needed to come with a clear message that the data would not be used against them.

Iain Mathieson explained that Defra was keen to work with the Angling Trust to ensure that the study would not be a burden and set out how it was proposed that the data would be collected.

The Minister outlined the importance of data in decisions such as determining an MCZ, which in turn might have advantages for sea anglers. He noted the comments on intent and said we would try to get the message across.

David Mitchell noted the recent 'Fish Fight' campaign, which many here are supporting, and reported that the Eastern English Channel has seen discards of up to 64 per cent of bass caught. He linked this to concern over the Bristol Channel bass trawl fishery and asked the Minister to revisit his predecessor's decision to sanction this fishery.

The Minister responded that he supported the 'Fish Fight' campaign and that discards are indefensible, he added that there were positive developments such as the 'Fishing for the Market' initiative. However, we would look into the specific points made.

3. Administration of Fisheries

Ivor Llewellyn outlined the main points of a joint paper previously submitted by NGOs in response to the NEWP consultation. It was considered essential that a single body remains responsible for regulating all activities that affect a river, including fisheries, to ensure integrated catchment management. However, it was felt the Environment Agency (EA) should focus on regulation and oversight, leaving delivery to others. He believed that the Rivers Trusts grants were a positive move. It was also important that anglers were involved in decision making, but noted that the EA had made improvements in this area.

Finally, in relation to EA fisheries funding, he stressed how important it was for this function to receive adequate funding. They support the continued requirement for anglers to pay a rod licence fee, but felt that anglers should have greater influence in decisions on how this money was spent.

4. Third Sector Delivery

Arlin Rickard pointed to the large and committed angling and fisheries third sector with a history of partnership that open to a role in the Big Society. They had strong national leaders and there were many ways in which they could contribute. He added that the third sector could contribute in areas such as consultation, planning, management, applied scientific research and particularly delivery. He noted that in the past the approach had been ad-hoc and there was a need to be more strategic. He noted that while Rivers Trusts were ready and willing to accept the challenge, funding and capacity building issues would need to be addressed.

Roger Furniss pointed out that the Big Society approach would take time to get up to speed after a number of years of current practice, and noted that third sector coverage was not yet homogenous.

The Minister noted that this was a particular challenge in that while some fisheries/areas were well resourced, others were not and capacity building is key. There will be a need to provide greater freedom to progress initiatives where capacity already exists, but focus on building capacity where it doesn't exist. He also noted the importance of having overarching guidance to ensure use of best practice..

Geoff Bateman said that the EA would rise to the challenge and become more proactive and transparent in delivering effective catchment wide approaches. They would also do more to share information and consider how other bodies could deliver what the EA can no longer do.

Shaun Leonard stated that he was encouraged by the good partnership work already in place and that the future looked good.

Adam Brown reported a high level of angler involvement in habitat improvement work, but noted the need for co-ordination and sharing of best practice. He also felt that low level support funding was needed to help initiate such work.

Peter Spillett noted the need to manage fisheries holistically (integrated catchment management) and was concerned over the abolition of the RFERACs. He felt there needed to be a regional body that could provide more strategic guidance, since this wouldn't come from third party delivery.

5. Hydropower

Roger Furniss stated that the various angling NGOs were not opposed to hydropower per se, but indicated that such developments could not be regarded as supplying 'green' energy if they killed fish. They were concerned about the recent increase in numbers of applications and the proliferation of plants, some of which were receiving public subsidy. He mentioned a recent case on the Trent as an example of where they felt that the environmental safeguards were insufficient. There was an imbalance of risk/reward and a presumption of approval with insufficient deference to the precautionary principle. Angling and fisheries bodies were excluded from the initial consideration of applications and even when applications were rejected there was an appeals process, where again the angling and fisheries bodies were excluded. He pointed to the very low contribution that hydropower could make to national energy requirements (0.2%) contrasting this with the economic benefits from angling (£3 billion). He argued for a number of measures to be introduced:

- i) Abstraction should be treated in a similar way as pollution,
- ii) There should be an independent review of the Environment Agency's hydropower good practice guidelines (GPG) - possibly by Defra,
- iii) The consideration of applications should be unbiased,

- iv) Approvals should allow a more catchment based approach, enabling possible cumulative impacts to be considered.

Mark Lloyd asked that these concerns should be raised with DECC and noted that there would be a major conference on hydropower on 3 March 2011.

The Minister said that we would reflect on the points raised. He was aware of the current problems surrounding review of the GPG and was keen that both angling NGOs and hydropower representatives were back around the table as soon as possible to progress this.

6. Fish Passage

Paul Knight stressed how important it was to have the legislation and measures on fish passage in place before the end of 2012. This work must be prioritised, but added that the third sector could play a big part in delivery. He reiterated the importance of an integrated catchment management approach, and reminded the meeting that all fish, coarse and game, migrate to some extent. He speculated how the legislation might apply to hydropower plants that are being put into place now and the need to plan ahead. Ivor Llewelyn asked whether the EA might be able to use the WFD as a legal instrument to get rid of old obstructions via licences.

Ian Johnson said that the EA don't currently have full catchment based data. They were trying to improve the situation and put the two sets of data they have on hydropower and fish passes on a similar platform, so they can take a catchment management based approach. They were looking at the range of obstructions with a view to prioritising information from local bodies with that collated internally. With regard to fish passage, in addition to eel regulations, there was the WFD, but without the full legislation in place on obstructions it was difficult to act, particularly where only coarse fish or trout were involved.

7. Water Framework Directive (WFD)

Mark Lloyd commented that much of today's agenda related to WFD objectives. He remarked that the rivers in the UK were once teeming with fish and the North Sea was once one of the most productive in the world. With some time and effort we could see a return to more abundant stocks.

Paul Knight said that we need to see a realignment with the environment and agriculture, with compensation for environmental protection. Roger Furniss said that the term 'diffuse pollution' does not do the subject justice and we need to harden the language – it was, after all, pollution.

The Minister wanted to move on beyond the current Judicial Review, and felt that the WFD offered an exciting opportunity. He added that he was well aware of the damage from diffuse pollution and we were looking at what environmental schemes to adjust and utilise. However, with the price of grain so high this was a challenge.

Rory Wallace concluded that there were a number of initiatives, irrespective of the Judicial Review. These included catchment based approach and capacity building.

He hoped that they would be in a position to come forward with more initiatives in the next couple of months.

8. Invasive Non-Native Species

Bruno Broughton opened the discussion by acknowledging the damage that Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS) can cause. He noted that we are an island and that this does offer some additional protection and control. He considered that the UK leads the way in its approach to tackling INNS within EU framework and encouraged the Minister to emphasise prevention in the “prevention, detection, control and containment” hierarchy.

Mark Lloyd added that this was an area for collaborative working and NGOs/Anglers can (and do) play a strong role in reporting and managing, noting that it was an angler that discovered the ‘killer shrimp’ recently. It was also an area for volunteers to get involved in removal exercises.

Paul Knight highlighted that there was no room for complacency, noting the potential threat that *Gyrodactylus salaris* posed to UK salmon rivers should it ever be introduced here.

Ian Russell advised that proposed new legislation on the keeping and release of non-native fish species was intended to allow a more proactive approach and to ensure that any new species could be adequately risk assessed before they were used. This was consistent with seeking to prevent problems before they could occur.

The Minister relayed his experience of signal crayfish and how it had brought home to him that eradication was not easy to achieve for some species.

Arlin Rickard made mention of biosecurity planning and how that can offer catchment based programmes across the country, building on RAFTS example and working with the Non Native Species Secretariat at FERA. He mentioned the forthcoming INNS event on 7th June.

9. Predators

Bruno Broughton introduced the item. He recognised that the issue of predation raised strong emotions, but that policy needed to be based on clear evidence and good science. Cormorant numbers had increased sharply in many parts of the world and brought them into conflict with fishery interests. However, experience suggested that culling was rarely effective as shot birds were often rapidly replaced by others, particularly at favoured feeding sites and since more marginal feeding sites tended to be abandoned first.

It was noted that there had been much previous work on cormorants in UK and elsewhere and that substantial efforts had been made in the past to liaise with NGOs and different stakeholder groups. This had led to the development of advisory

leaflets, a booklet on protecting your fishery from cormorants and guidance on the licensing scheme. In this context, he noted that since the earlier policy change, the number of licences issued had never reached the imposed limit.

The presence of apex predators is not a problem, but cumulatively with other pressures on fish they can often be the tipping point.

Otters had recently also emerged as a growing concern, with one problem being the perception that the animals were being regularly released into the wild. An Otter Steering Group had been established to foster informed debate and had recently produced a report entitled "Otters - the Facts". It was noted that at stillwater sites it was sometimes possible to protect fisheries using fencing, but this was not possible on rivers. A clear view was expressed that the death of otters in the interests of anglers would be a "shot in both feet" for the angling community. He reminded the meeting that anglers catch fish for fun, but predators catch fish to live.

Godfrey Williams thanked Bruno for his work with the Otter Steering Group and noted that the EA had funded otter fencing at some 16 fishery sites at a total cost of £76,000.

Roger Furniss accepted that predator numbers were typically regulated by prey availability, but suggested that where fish stocks faced a range of limiting factors predators could represent a tipping point. There was therefore a need to be able to manage predator numbers in some instances.

Ian Russell advised that the current system was designed to provide a flexible adaptive approach, whereby licence numbers could go up and down in response to observed changes in the cormorant population. Matt Heydon provided further clarification on how the licensing system had operated since the previous policy review in 2004.

The Minister said he was mindful of the reputational aspect with respect to predator control. He noted that the presence of otters and apex predators could be regarded as a positive indicator of the health of the aquatic environment. However, he recognised that striking a balance was important and he wanted to be able to ensure that fisheries were given suitable protection also. He announced a review of the policy in respect of cormorants indicating that the precise terms of reference for the review would be clarified with stakeholder groups.

10. Shaping the wider summit to follow on 21st March.

The Chair introduced the item by saying that Defra were keen for the next summit to be 'your summit' so it was important that the agenda included items that NGOs felt were relevant. Defra also wanted the next summit to include participants who might not normally attend events such as this in order to reach out to a wide cross section. He emphasised that recreational sea angling would be included in the summit.

Adam Brown suggested that one topic might be to look at the social aspect of angling, building on the 3 year project they were undertaking which had focused on

participation benefits, encouraging younger people and assessing how anglers can benefit the rural economy. The summit might consider how to utilise and build on these findings in respect of issues such as volunteering roles and social inclusion.

David Moore suggested that the economic benefits of angling should be addressed, with the emphasis on the Big Society. He further noted the support that angling receives from Sport England. Mark Lloyd suggested that the name of the summit might be “Delivering the Big Society”. He felt there should be particular emphasis on delivery and identifying obstacles, with a focus on how the latter could be overcome through capacity building.

It was stressed that recreational sea angling also needed to be included, as well as the EA mapping out their ‘Way Forward’ for the future. It was also hoped that the Minister would be able to provide views on his ‘bigger vision’, including issues such as the White Papers and WFD.

The Chair said that officials would continue to keep in touch with regard to the development of agenda items etc.

11. Conclusions

The Minister concluded that this was an ongoing process and thanked the participants for a enjoyable and interesting summit, adding that he truly valued what they all do and those who they represent.