



Angling Trust
Eastwood House
6 Rainbow Street
Leominster
Herefordshire HR6 8DQ

t: 0844 770 0616
e: admin@anglingtrust.net
w: www.anglingtrust.net

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Dear George,

Fish Eating Bird Licensing

Natural England recently informed us of the numbers of cormorants & goosanders licensed and shot for the last season 2016/17. For cormorants, this figure was 3,243 licensed to be shot and birds actually shot was 2,810. This is the highest number of cormorants licensed and shot to date and follows the previous season where again Natural England licensed over 3,000 birds to be shot.

In your letter following the evaluation of the Fisheries Management Advisors and the Area Based Licensing you stated that should there be evidence of a need to increase the 3,000 bird limit then you would consider a review. The Angling Trust believes that as Natural England has licensed over 3,000 birds to be shot for two consecutive winters then this is more than sufficient evidence of the need to increase the number of cormorants licensed. At no time has this compromised the conservation status of the cormorant.

The Angling Trust believes that in order to protect our fisheries better, at a time when they face multiple other threats, then the limit should now be set at least as high as 6,000 birds. Last winter we saw an increase in the number of cormorants migrating here from mainland Europe following colder weather there than usual and we fear that this pattern is likely to continue. It is unfortunate that the British Trust for Ornithology has not yet been able to release the over-wintering cormorant numbers to corroborate our observations and reports from fishery managers. The main breeding areas for the cormorant are in the countries surrounding the Baltic sea, and Denmark alone reported that a total of 33,171 nests have been registered this year, which is an increase of 4.7% on last year's counts.

An increase in the limit to at least 6,000 would allow us to protect this country's coarse and game fish stocks, many of which are in decline, as demonstrated by the recent publication of the Salmon Stock Assessment by the Environment Agency & Cefas and the decline in eel populations over the past two decades. There are numerous reports of declining roach, dace, barbel and other coarse fish populations on some rivers around the country, but unfortunately there are precious few data to provide cut and dried evidence due to the under-resourcing of the Environment Agency.

Given the adaptive management system used in England to monitor cormorant populations, we do not believe that our proposal poses any risk of impacting on the conservation status of the cormorant.

We continue to believe that the best outcome would be for cormorants to be included on the general licence as long as the conservation status of the birds is not threatened. However, we have not been able to persuade ministers to adopt this approach which is why we are pressing for the best possible outcomes within the licensing framework.

Of increasing concern is the predation of fish stocks by goosanders, and this year has seen Natural England refuse a number of licences for control of goosanders, and reduce the number of birds allowed to be shot on some of the small number of licences which were issued. Natural England claims that there is insufficient evidence of damage but, like cormorants, goosanders are exclusively fish eaters. They are increasingly being seen on the middle and lower reaches of rivers where coarse fish predominate and when present on rivers in the spring they almost exclusively predate on salmon smolts. A study on the River Dee in Scotland recently found that some 25% of mortality of salmon smolts occurred in river, much of which was thought to be the result of predation. In light of the Salmon Five Point Approach, and the need to do everything possible to restore salmon stocks, the Angling Trust firmly believes that there should be many more licences issued for goosander control to protect vulnerable salmon smolts.

The Angling Trust also believes that the government's policy on evidence requirements in order to be granted a licence to control goosanders should now change to that which is required for cormorants: i.e. that a fishery should only be required to show that goosanders are present in significant numbers and that there is a fishery to protect.

The Angling Trust will shortly be relaunching our mapping web site - Cormorant Watch 2 – to gather more information about the distribution and behaviour of cormorants and goosanders over the coming year. We are writing to you to coincide with this launch in the hope that you will take the necessary action to allow fishery managers to protect our nation's fisheries more effectively, without causing any risks to the conservation status of either bird species.

I would welcome the opportunity to have a discussion with you about this issue, along with other areas of government policy that could provide some immediate respite for the freshwater angling industry and community who are increasingly frustrated by a lack of action to protect the fish stocks on which our sport and businesses rely. I look forward to receiving a response to the letter I sent you in early September on behalf of the Angling Trust and other fisheries conservation charities regarding the Salmon Five Point Approach.

I look forward to hearing from you in the near future.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Mark Lloyd". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Mark Lloyd

Chief Executive