

Anglers of the land, unite!

Print

By Richard Donkin

Published: February 2 2007 19:31 | Last updated: February 2 2007 19:31

No angler who has witnessed it will forget the heart-wrenching consequences of serious water contamination. Dead and dying fish floating down a well-stocked river has to be one of the saddest sights for anyone who enjoys fishing.

Back in the 1930s and 40s when the factory system was reaching its zenith, pollution incidents were so common and prosecution so difficult that the perpetrators could often get away free or with a relatively light fine.

That was before a group of UK lawyers who shared a passion for angling decided to pool their expertise and the resources of their respective angling clubs to fight a sewage discharge case through the civil courts.

They won. Now, 2,000 successful cases later, with just three losses, the Angler's Conservation Association is planning an expansion into Scotland, the spiritual home of rod-and-line salmon fishing.

If the fish farmers are not yet quaking in their boots, they should be. More than a million farmed salmon either escaped or died in Scottish fish farms during 2005. A list of fish losses and the companies involved is published on www.salmonfarmmonitor.org, run by the Salmon Farm Protest Group.

Lost farm fish are turning up in river systems, invading the existing gene pools. "We can identify these fish, find where they come from and assess the damage they are causing," says Mark Lloyd, the ACA's executive director.

There are big differences between civil actions and those that pass through the criminal courts in the British judicial system. In criminal courts, the burden of proof must be overwhelming so that a jury is convinced "beyond reasonable doubt". A civil case, however, is decided on a simple majority "on the balance of probabilities".

The ACA has won pay-outs more than £400,000 in its most successful cases. Fines in criminal prosecutions rarely exceed £20,000. Another difference is that in criminal cases, the fines go to the Treasury whereas damages in civil actions are awarded to the winners.

But mounting a civil action is costly so the association must maintain a fighting fund. It is to be hoped, therefore, that Scotland's riparian owners will dig deep to support the new move. Rod-and-line fishers could do more too. Of the 1.3m licence holders in England and Wales, only 8,500 have been willing enough to fork out the ACA's £20 a year single membership fee.

These same anglers will wail and moan if their river is poisoned by farm effluent or a sewage release. The ACA's work can make a difference. It has been one of the most active bodies, for example, in securing a suspension of the sale of the sheep dip chemical, Cypermethrin, used to fight sheep scab.

Cypermethrin has proved a hazard for river systems, particularly in Wales. River contamination has occurred through leaks from sheep dips. One remedy, says Lloyd, is to use alternative dosing methods where the chemical treatment is applied selectively to every animal.

These are big issues for anglers. I know from experience, however, that there is far more interest in the "killer fly" or the "never-before-revealed foolproof method of catching fish" than there is in supporting campaigns and organisations devoted to protecting or restoring fish stocks. Yet there is not a fly on the planet that will succeed in an empty river.

Angling is such a solitary, focused pastime, it's easy to be selfish in our approach. An example of this is the conversation I had recently with someone who was concerned about the effects of climate change. "I think I may book one of the higher river beats this year," he said. "The fish

seem to be heading upstream at a faster rate because of the warmer conditions.”

I confess that I had been thinking along similar lines. But anglers do have a role to play that should not be confined to piecemeal measures by small single-issue groups.

It is time that some fishing organisations pooled their resources. An example of how effective this can be is the Blueprint For Water (www.blueprintforwater.org.uk), a coalition of like-minded interest groups that has drawn up a 10-step action list for sustainable water by 2015.

It's no good just standing by the river with our rods any more, watching the levels falling, the banks degrading and the rubbish piling up in the water. In the US, organisations such as American Rivers (www.americanrivers.org) have shown what can be achieved.

I filled in my ACA membership form and posted it off this week. If you want more of a two-way deal, there is just time to bid for some great salmon beat fishing in the Atlantic Salmon Trust annual auction. There is online bidding on www.atlanticsalmontrust.org until Monday at 5pm when postal and fax bids should also have been submitted.

If you miss that one, The Wild Trout Trust is offering all kinds of fishing opportunities and paraphernalia in a 10th anniversary auction next month. Bidding instructions can be found on www.wildtrout.org.

www.richarddonkin.com More columns at www.ft.com/donkin

Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2007

"FT" and "Financial Times" are trademarks of the Financial Times. [Privacy policy](#) | [Terms](#)
© Copyright The Financial Times Ltd 2007.