

United Usk Fishermen's Association



Newsletter No. 8 - May 2005

Negative items seem to be those that attract our attention and probably rightly so. They are the ones that need most effort and many can only be solved over a long period. Pollution is one that grabs our attention today.

We are faced with situations that will become increasingly troublesome if not corrected. Some of our towns are blatantly causing pollution via combined sewage outlets (CSOs) and they avoid sanction because, theoretically CSOs only operate when the river is in full spate. Therefore the pollution is sufficiently 'diluted'. This is clearly not the case when the river is low but local, intense rainfall causes the CSO to discharge sewerage straight into a low flow river. In most of our towns, and certainly Abergavenny, existing sewage and rainwater drainage infrastructure is not capable of dealing with the extra volume generated from domestic and industrial development. Our local authorities are keen to expand building, as demand necessitates, and benefit from the increased rates, without investing in upgrading the infrastructure. This is badly needed.

70% of Diffuse Pollution is caused by agriculture. Examples include slurry escapement, sheep dip, silting, nitrates, and phosphates. The new Single Farm Payment with Cross Compliance should help agriculture correct this bad practice that mushroomed under the CAP. The previous arrangement of subsidies paid on livestock numbers and hence encouraged over stocking.

There is hope too via the relatively new Water Framework Directive. It is potentially the most important legislation to emerge from Europe and it envisages whole river basin management. The basis for measuring good water quality is the ability to sustain fish and invertebrates, ie good ecological status. Until recently chemical analysis was the key indicator. This rethink puts fish, what they eat and their ecological surroundings in the £1 seats.

One of the important parts of this process is the Usk Catchment Abstraction Management Strategy. The process aims to improve the way by which our water resources are managed, balancing the needs of the abstractors, the environment and other water users and ultimately working towards long term sustainable use. Your Committee has undertaken to take part in the CAMS consultation process.

Thanks to the initiative of the UUFA the Usk has already started the process to deliver an important contribution to the WFD. Our recommendation to join the Wye & Usk Foundation and encourage our membership to contribute to the Usk Project has done more to focus attention on the potential of our great river than anything I can remember.

In just over a year the work completed on the Usk Project by the Wye & Usk Foundation, leading a partnership including the EAW, CCW, Keep Wales Tidy, BBNP, the Forestry Commission, Brecknock Wildlife Trust, the UUFA, and recently, the MOD has achieved more than in the last fifty. Every aspect of the project detail is agreed and an order of work planned. In one year 50 kilometres of tributaries have been opened up and are already producing more game fish and invertebrates than for many years. For every £1 contributed by an individual £12.5 is spent. The individual donation acts as a catalyst for further donations from the Partners and thence to be matched by European funds to almost 50% of the total reached by the Partners. Our investment return is vast measured against increasing population of fish, fly life, and value of our fisheries. The centre pages report in detail of the progress made.

The continued work of W&UF will be increasingly important as the WAG looks for ways of delivering its own stated tourism ambition of increasing the number of fishermen coming to Wales. WAG will seek successful project leaders with proven ability who can manage a plan with the right ingredients to provide sought after fishing destinations. W&UF are in a key position to help fulfil that aim.

The articles inside are diverse, interesting and fun. We hope you enjoy a good read and are better informed as a result of Newsletter No 8. Next year, 2006, is our Triennial General Meeting and an opportunity for you to vote for a new Chairman and Committee members.

Nick Brabner

What is the ACA ?

The ACA is essentially a legal outfit that acts in law on behalf of angling.

The ACA's legal team of in-house solicitors represents member clubs, riparians and fishery owners in seeking compensation after pollution or other damage occurs. The ACA also obtains injunctions preventing activities which threaten to damage fisheries from going ahead. Over the years, the ACA has taken on many thousands of cases against polluters and those who damage fisheries, recovering £millions in damages.

The ACA's legal team has an enviable reputation and uses specialist methods to calculate damages payable and these have been accepted by insurance companies, loss adjusters, solicitors and judges. The ACA employs environmental economists to verify its methods. The ACA also employs the leading fisheries biologists and experts to advise on the effect of the pollution and other damage on fish and waterways.

Importantly, ACA club, riparian or fishery members do not pay a penny for legal representation when the ACA takes a court action on their behalf to recover compensation. The member also gets to keep all the damages to use to protect and improve the affected fishery. This is something no other organisation does in the same way.

Why join as an individual ?

You may be concerned that joining the ACA as an individual angler is not worth it - the focus seems to be the clubs and owners. You would be wrong.

Without the ACA you can be quite certain that many rivers and lakes would be more heavily polluted than they are now. By bringing and winning cases, the ACA creates a deterrent to polluters and others who would damage angling. And if angling is protected, all anglers benefit. Importantly the ACA can take cases to court that would otherwise not stand a chance of getting there. The backing of a large membership makes it possible to bring test cases on issues such as minewater, invertebrate kills, diffuse pollution, over-abstraction and so on. These are cases a solicitor in private practice would not normally touch.

Clearly, all these cases benefit not only the club directly affected, but all anglers across the country. In addition, the ACA also lobbies Government hard on behalf of all its members in other areas such as water resources management and takes any opportunity to respond to consultation and debate on the aquatic environment.

If you are conscientious angler, then ACA membership is a must. Please see our website on www.a-c-a.org for details of membership or call 01568-620447 or write to us at ACA, Eastwood House, 6 Rainbow Street, Leominster, Herefordshire HR6 8DQ. If you wish to contact to our legal department – call 01568-620447 or e-mail either Karen Capper or Guy Linley-Adams on karen@a-c-a.org or guy@a-c-a.org.

Guy Linley-Adams *ACA in-house solicitor*

Poaching – What's happened to the Policing?

Fishery Proprietors, Fishermen and W&UF are concerned by poaching with impunity, examples include:

- Incidents relating to salmon poached by net on the Usk near Usk.
- Numerous rod and line incidents between Brecon and Usk.
- Undetected incidents via anecdotal evidence
- Salmon being caught with net marks

The Angling Public perception is that:

- Fishermen have the impression that EAW has a totally inadequate budget to police our rivers
- EAW has lost the detailed knowledge of our river and tributaries
- Fishermen are being intimidated by unruly rod and line poachers and frightened from their own water.
- They have lost confidence in the reporting system recommended by EAW and backed by W&UF and UUFA because it still does not work consistently.

The result of this widespread perception will mean that less fishermen will fish in areas where this behaviour is common. Via the Usk Local Fishery Group we have urged the EAW to review their statutory duty to police our fisheries adequately. We have recommended that additional bailiffs are necessary with a reporting system that works and will help pinpoint the trouble spots.

We feel that the EAW has to regain public confidence through a reliable service to protect the investment made by Fishery Owners, W&UF and Partners, including the EAW. We are well aware of the budgetary restrictions imposed but feel it is time for an alternative strategy to be sought and discussed.

This is a very old problem as Sir Richard Hanbury Tenison reminds me:

There have been many reports of poaching during the past season and so long as we have so few bailiffs on the Middle and Lower Usk it is likely to be an intractable problem. However, it is nothing new as a report by the Usk and Ebbw Board of Conservators, dated February 1, 1878, makes clear.

During the year of 1874 twenty-two cases were brought before the Magistrates of the three Upper Petty Sessional Divisions, and thirteen were dismissed – while in the remainder of the Usk Fishery District, out of fifteen prosecutions, approved and ordered by the same authorities, and advised and conducted by the same solicitors, not one was dismissed. As might have been expected there has since been a considerable increase in the boldness of offenders against the Salmon Laws.

To illustrate the state of the district we may mention what recently occurred during a visit made by your Chairman (A.D.Berrington) to Brecon. He arrived there on the 5th of January.

That night the water bailiffs were driven off the Tarrell Brook by a crowd of poachers. On the 6th, when standing near the door of the Castle Hotel, about midday, he observed persons endeavouring to gaff a fish in the centre of the town. On the morning of the 7th in walking from Senny Bridge to Brecon in company with Mr Lyne (Colonel Charles Lyne was Hon. Secretary of the Board of Conservators), he found freshly killed salmon put up defiantly on poles by the side of the turnpike road near a spawning bed which has been watched by the water bailiffs through a great part of the previous night.

Environment Agency welcomes closure

THE permanent closure of the Usk Drift Net fishery announced by the Welsh Assembly has been welcomed by the Environment Agency.

The bylaw bringing about the permanent cessation of drift netting off Uskmouth was included amongst a suite of new bylaws closing the remaining significant mixed-stock salmon net fisheries in Wales.

Mixed stock salmon fisheries are net fisheries which exploit salmon from a number of different river stocks.

The announcement marks the end of a process which began in 1996 with the introduction of the Usk Drift Nets, Net Limitation Order.

The order was obtained by Environment Agency Wales because the mixed stock nature of the Usk drift net fishery, meant that no new licence was to be issued for a period of ten years. In this way a gradual phasing out of netting off the mouth of the Usk was to have been achieved.

In 2000 the Wye and Usk Foundation and the United Usk Fishermen's Association reached a financial settlement with the netmen and bought out their licenses for a season. Because of the terms of the Net Limitation Order this effectively ended legal drift netting in the Severn Estuary. Estimates suggest that this Action has already saved more than 1,000 salmon per year since this time.

This recent announcement of new Environment Agency bylaws secures the deal for good and will ensure that the salmon saved can successfully breed in the rivers Usk, Wye and Severn.

Nick Brabner, chairman of the United Usk Fishermen's Association said, "It is pleasing that the risks taken by anglers and fishery owners from both the Wye and Usk to save salmon has now resulted in a permanent cessation of netting off the mouth of the Usk."

Dr Stephen Marsh-Smith, Director of the Wye and Usk Foundation also welcomed the news and said he was, "very relieved to hear," it.

"This net fishery intercepted substantial numbers of salmon returning to the, Usk and Wye and the closure represents another significant step towards sustainable management of salmon stocks in both of these rivers."

Peter Gough, Environment Agency Wales, Senior Fisheries Scientist said, "This demonstrates well the benefit of public private partnerships.

"Here, the Agency working alongside the Wye and Usk Foundation and the United Usk Fishermen's Association achieved a permanent environmental improvement."

He added, "In this case it is also pleasing that the improved protection afforded to salmon was facilitated by a negotiated agreement between netting and angling interests.

Annual Meeting

on

Thursday 17th March 2005

At our annual meeting held at Gliffaes the agenda covered the following

- Welsh Assembly Government announcement of new byelaws covering mixed-stock salmon net fisheries
- Pollution incidents on the Usk
- Poaching
- Water extraction in Brecon and Prioress Mill

Response by EAW, the Wye & Usk Foundation and the ACA

- Progress report on the Usk Project by the Wye & Usk Foundation covering a round-up of the work completed in 2004 and work planned for 2005/6
- Report and focus on the Usk Project finance

Salmon and Trout catch returns

Each of the subjects on our agenda are addressed in this Newsletter and, for that reason, they are not recorded as minutes. Should you wish to see the minutes we will be delighted to provide them by email or directly to me, Nick Brabner.

United Usk Fishermen's Association

The Hon. Secretary has requested that members pay by Direct Debit. The time saving in paying by DD is huge and still gives you complete control.

In addition it is extremely helpful to have your email address so that we may inform you of events when necessary.

So please just email me:
nick@gliffaeshotel.com

Catch Returns

Why Bother?

Arthur Ransome once famously described the meeting between two fishermen on a North Country stream. The first enquired of the second how he was faring. The second replied that he had landed three or four keepable trout and risen a number of others, with innumerable little ones returned. This summary was somewhat in excess of the truth which was nearer to “a couple of small fish landed.”

Ransome explained that the first fisher had told his fellow in this way so that following the latter's recalculation (ie a significant mental downsizing) he would eventually arrive at the actual truth!

So much then for communication between anglers about their catch but there has always been an historic interest in keeping records that has led to some interesting research. On Tweed for example, in response to requests for research for information about the current size of brown trout, modern catch surveys were compared with historic catch records showing that in the past trout bags contained many more, but smaller fish.

Today however, there is an even greater need for making accurate returns. This particularly applies to salmon and the reason is that a very substantial investment has and is being made to the river. To keep the momentum of this going, we need accurate details (date, weight and place ideally) so that any improvements can be highlighted and the advantage of inward investment pressed home.

Sceptics will point out that rod catches do not always reflect the levels of fish stocks. However, catch details will confirm when salmon are returning, their weight gives an idea of the time spent at sea (5 - 7lbs grilse usually 1 year at sea; 9 - 13 lbs 2 years at sea; 18 - 25 3 years and so on) and numbers gives more than a clue to their abundance.

In 2000, the first year following the drift net and putcher buy out, our chairman and I asked the top 15 beat owners on the Usk for details of their seasons catch. This totalled in excess of 1200. Imagine how disappointed we were to find that from rod licence returns, the official figure was a mere 872. We need to convince sponsors, the Agency Assembly that investment brings improvements. Hiding our results will not help and nor we do think it has much effect on keeping rents low either. Please help by making a prompt and accurate return on your rod licence or should we collect data direct from the owners?

Dr S J Marsh - Smith

Which Fish to Smoke?

The curing and smoking of food developed for the sole purpose of preservation. With the advent of refrigeration, freezing and packaging it is now about taste enhancement, although the fundamentals remain the same.

It is the fat content of the food that is the first to breakdown and start decaying as food “goes off”. Bacteria responsible for decay need water. Curing by salting or brining removes the “Available Water Content” and with it some of the fat. In the past large quantities of salt over long periods of time would have been used in the curing process. Now, contemporary taste, health awareness and, of course, refrigeration have reduced the volume of salt to a minimum.

The actual smoking further improves preservation. By passing cold smoke through the cured food it is further dehydrated. Oak smoke is traditionally used because of its high tannin content. Tannins have excellent preservative qualities as well as giving a distinctive flavour. Again, in the past, food would be smoked until almost dry. Today we can simply smoke for good flavour!

Salmon has been historically popular for smoking for two main reasons:

- 1) The seasonal abundance of wild fish and consequent need for preservation.
- 2) The relatively oily flesh lends itself well to the smoking process. It does not become too dry and produces a fine tasting finished product.

The ideal salmon to smoke is the ideal fish to cook – the fresh silver bar caught within sight of the sea. Most of us are not lucky enough to have that opportunity and have to settle for a fish that has been in the river for several days if not weeks. These can also be delicious to eat, but the old “red” fish at the back end of the season is not. “Red” fish flesh has already discoloured to a pale greyish white from a vibrant pink, and no amount of smoking will remedy this situation!

“Red” fish are also full of eggs or milt. With a fresh fish the return after smoking is approximately 55% of the weight but with a back end fish this can drop to below 30%. Several fish of approximately 10lbs received last year had in excess of 3lbs of eggs. Once gutted, beheaded, boned, skinned, cured, smoked and sliced the end result was a mere 1.5lbs of inferior smoked fish!

And at what cost to the river?

3lbs of eggs equates to some 2000 eggs!

But the colour of a fish can be very deceptive. Several very silver fish received for smoking turned out to be of very poor quality (admittedly all back end fish), while a couple of darker colour fish produced a delicious end product.

As a rule of thumb if you would be happy to cook and eat the fish it will be good to smoke – if not return the fish with the expectation that it will produce many more. In our hearts we all have a pretty good inkling of whether a fish is worth keeping. Trust your instincts!

A SMOKER



The Usk has a number of first rate fishing Associations. As riparian owners they manage their water extremely well, invest in the future, and also provide valuable input into fishery matters. Equally they are enthusiastic supporters for projects that will yield overall river improvements, like the Usk Project. We asked for brief histories from these thriving Angling Associations and Societies.

This year we start with C&DAS and Merthyr Angling

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CRICKHOWELL & DISTRICT ANGLING SOCIETY

In the mid 1960's a group of angling enthusiasts in the Crickhowell area got together and decided that it would be a good idea to form a local angling club. Originally about twenty local fishermen were involved. However, they had a problem. They had no specific water available locally. Then, as now, fishing rights were extremely expensive and, as now, few waters came to the market. With no money available to buy outright, they decided to rent from local estates. To do this they needed to form a syndicate or a fishing club. After much discussion, it was decided that the fishing club option was the best way forward, and Crickhowell & District Angling Society was born.

During its formative years the Society rented various beats, including the Glanwysg, from Glanusk Estate, and various stretches on the River Grwyney from local farmers and landowners. However, rental fees kept rising on an annual basis and, in the mid 1970's, the Society members decided that it would be better to buy their own water, borrowing money, if necessary, to do so. In 1975 an opportunity arose to purchase the right hand bank of the Legar Waters below Crickhowell bridge. This was the first major acquisition made by the fishing club. No waters were then rented on the main River Usk but the club kept up the rental of the various beats on the River Grwyney. The club moved from strength to strength and there was a huge demand for quality fishing in the area at that time. In 1980 the Society purchased the double bank fishing rights downstream from Llangenny bridge to almost as far as the confluence with the main River Usk at Glangrwyney, which included the 'salmon leaps' at Llangenny. A couple of years later, in 1982, the left bank of the Legar Waters became available and, needless to say, the club snaffled them up to add to their growing fisheries portfolio. At this stage membership numbers were increased to accommodate fifty anglers.

The club's ambition has always been to expand and provide quality facilities for the membership. In 1986 the Society completed the purchase of the famous Red Barn fishery, which is upstream of the river bridge at Llanfoist on the left hand bank, but had to go heavily into debt to do so. Membership was increased to one hundred members to raise extra money from subscriptions to repay the outstanding borrowing. With astute financial management, all debts were repaid early by the beginning of the 1990's. The Bullpit Meadow fishery, on the left hand bank upstream of Crickhowell bridge, was acquired in 1991, and the Society subsequently built disabled fishing platforms on this stretch of the river.

The Society consolidated over the ensuing years. Very few waters became available at a reasonable cost. However, in October 2004 the club completed the purchase of the Glangrwyney Court fishery on main River Usk from the Winstanley family. This was bought out of cash reserves and the members are anxiously awaiting an opportunity to wet a line on this new beat during the 2005 fishing season.

Since 2001 the club has rented water on the River Monnow near Pandy and in 2004 also rented the Home Beat at Pant-y-Goitre on the main River Usk from the Lewis family. These rentals will probably be renewed for the 2005 fishing season.

The Society is now one of the major fishery owners within the Usk catchment and is 'managed' by a committee of nine people. All the assets of the Society are vested in the names of the Trustees of Crickhowell & District Angling Society. The committee members take a very keen interest in all aspects of the Usk fishery, not just the waters we own or control, and attend numerous fishery related meetings within the catchment each year. Some of them also attend regular meetings with national organisations and bodies, dealing with freshwater and saltwater angling issues on a national basis.

Paul Bowen

Chairman – Crickhowell & District Angling Society.



Merthyr Tydfil Angling Association was formed in 1967 by the amalgamation of two Associations. The St Tydfil Angling Association that was oriented towards coarse fishing and Merthyr and District Angling Association that was a game fishing Association. Merthyr and District following on from the old Merthyr Tydfil Borough Angling Association.

On amalgamation the decision was taken to rent, or lease water whether it was for coarse or Game fishing and wherever possible to consider the purchase of any fishing rights that became available. This policy has been adhered to and has been very successful.

In the 1960's we could not fish below Merthyr for some miles as the river was polluted. We did however purchase our first beat on the Taff in 1972 downstream of the collieries. Although the river was black fish did live there and we were looking to the future. There were also rumblings that the pollution, which was in the main coal dust from the mines, had to be curtailed. The mines eventually closed, as did some other manufacturing industries. The river became progressively cleaner and today it is possible to see fish in the Taff from both its sources to Cardiff Bay. The upper Taff is mainly Game Fishing; the lower Taff from Treforest down is a mixed fishery with a good head of brown trout and excellent coarse fishing. Barbell over 12lbs are caught regularly and there are substantial quantities of Grayling present. A new fish pass has been constructed at Treforest but it is unclear at present how successful it will be for Salmon and Sewin. Most if not all of the fishing on the Taff is managed by angling Associations.

In 1979 we purchased our first beat on the Usk at Kemeys Commander. This was part financed by the Association, Sports Council for Wales, and by an interest free loan from the then Welsh Water Authority. We had ten years in which to pay back the loan, in the mean time Welsh Water held the deeds. Our commitment resulted in our fees doubling which brought the inevitable grumbling, even though we now offered our members Salmon fishing at an extremely reasonable cost. The fact we had salmon fishing led to more anglers from other areas being interested in joining our Association. Even though we had a loan to repay our finances grew steadily and by 1987 when the Mardy beat above Abergavenny came on the market we were in a position to bid for it. We were successful and as one loan came to an end we embarked on another. With the purchase of the Mardy fishery our applications for membership increased, this ensured that we had no trouble in meeting our loan repayments. We finished our loan repayments in 1987 and in the same year Treharris Angling Association decided to join us. This meant that our fishing on the Taff extended to ten miles from Quakers yard to Pontsticill Reservoir. By 1993 we were able to purchase the Ysbytty fishery on the Usk without a loan. Our acquisitions on the Usk have enabled people, who hitherto had not been able to afford to fish for salmon, the chance to do so.

We became aware of the UUFA when the proposal was made for the barrage at Newport, we have been members ever since and have wholeheartedly supported them in their campaigns against the Usk Barrage, the Net Buyout, and latterly in the project being run by the Wye & Usk Foundation. We as an Association have given substantial funds towards each of the above campaigns. We have recognized that the river needs help and that is why we support the UUFA. We would urge all those who own beats no matter how large or small to support the latest project. Remember, united we stand divided we fall. UUFA is dedicated to the whole river and in running the new project is taking a holistic view for the benefit of owners large and small. UUFA is able to substantially increase any donations by using your money to draw down extra funding from Europe. It is possible, that this could be the last funding from Europe available for such projects. Now is the time therefore to invest in your future fishing.

Tony Rees (Treasurer Merthyr Angling Association)

The Usk Project showed a remarkable parallel with the Usk salmon season last year. After a steady start it ticked over through the summer months before exploding into action from August onwards. I am pleased to be able to say that the momentum has been retained through the winter and a huge amount has now been achieved on the river.

The headlines are:

- A full catchment survey has been undertaken to prioritise and target work for maximum benefit
- Migratory fish access has been improved at 9 locations opening up over 50 km of extra salmon spawning habitat and more than double that amount of trout spawning habitat. A full programme of further work has now obtained consent for this summer.
- 14.6km of stream has been coppiced and is currently being fenced. Another 10.1km is currently in the consenting procedure
- The Usk passport has been launched and now includes 1 roving voucher beat and 7 booking office beats in 2005.

Survey

Commencing in early 2003, while we agreed the procedures for work with CCW, we took the opportunity to conduct a survey of all the principle tributaries upstream of Abergavenny and the main river above the junction with the Crai. What we found was unexpected and at times shocking. Over 40% of the catchment had access impaired or completely blocked for spawning salmon and larger main river trout. Most of the catchment exhibited signs of over shading and many sites were seriously impacted by stock access. The good news from this survey is that the potential to improve the Usk as a salmon and trout fishery is enormous.

Fish passes

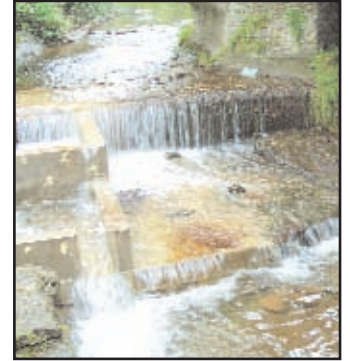
The quickest and most cost effective way of improving fish populations is to let them fully use the available habitat. This means that they need access to this habitat. In the case of the Usk this was not happening.

During the summer of 2004, 4 fish passes were installed on the Rhiangoll, Crawnon and Menasgin, 4 weirs on the Cilieni, Tarrell and Honddu were adapted or removed to allow access and 1 blocking debris dam was removed on the Tarrell. Some examples are shown below. Pictures 2 and 3 show a box fish pass on the bridge footings at Cwmdu that opened up 8.4km of good quality nursery habitat. Pictures 4 and 5 show what happens if you let Louis out of the office for a day with a chainsaw, while the same could be said for Stephen and a Hymac in pictures 6 and 7, where a weir with a notoriously inefficient fish pass was removed

The Usk Project

Progress so far

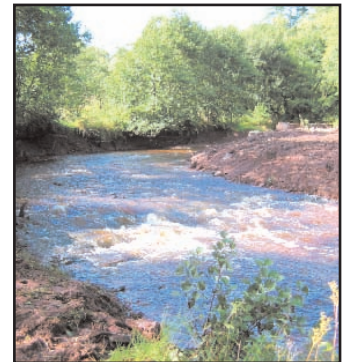
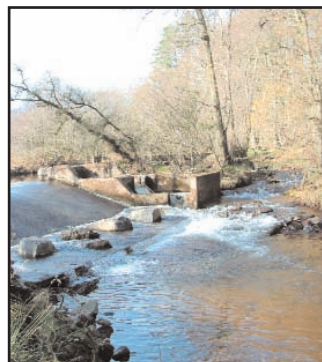
Simon Evans Deputy Director,
Wye and Usk Foundation



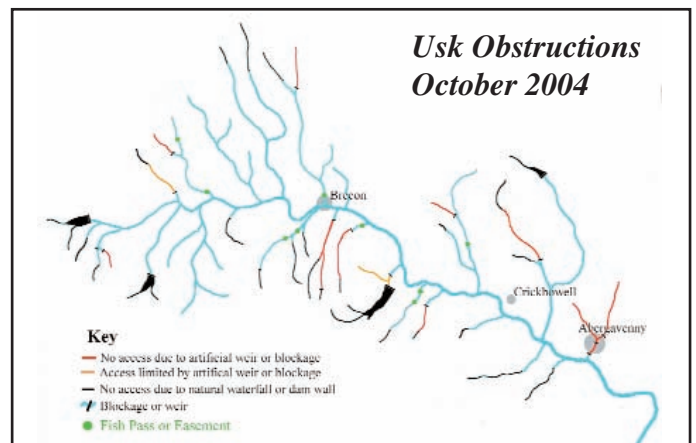
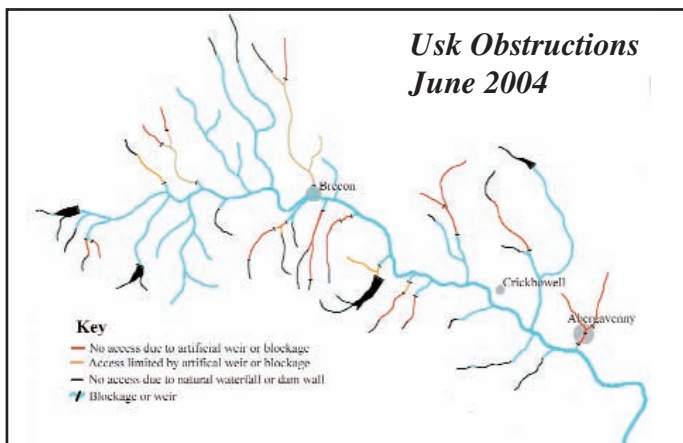
Rhiangoll at Cwmdu - Before & After



Louis clearing on the Tarrell - Before & After



Cilieni - Before & After



Habitat

With fish prevented from using much of the available habitat within the river by blockages, EA electrofishing studies show that much of the Usk can be likened to a shaken up can of beer. The top is kept on the population by the quality and quantity of habitat. Unlike the Wye, which had a very low population when WUF started its work, the Usk fish population will explode when the 'can is opened'. Right from the very first year, fry and parr survival rates will increase and more trout and salmon will result from our habitat work. Over the last winter, 1848m of the Rhiangoll, 807m of the Cynrig, 2400m of the Treweryn and 4515m of the Grwyne Fawr were coppiced. Another exciting development is that the MOD has joined the project. Through their funding of a habitat enhancement programme for the Eppynt range, we were able to improve the headwaters of the Bran, Ysgir, Cilieni and Honndu, where surveys in the autumn had shown heavy spawning of both salmon and trout. Throughout the whole of March the two habitat teams were up on the range coppicing the over shaded sections and a further 4987m of improved river has been added to the total.

On the 1st of April the teams put down the saws and now have the whole summer to fence these sections to create ideal salmonid habitat. Pictures 8 and 9 show a section of the Rhiangoll before and after coppicing has taken place.

Passport scheme

An important part of this work is to improve not only the fishery but also the value of the fishery to the local economy. A successful way of doing this was shown on the Wye through the Upper Wye Passport. Last year this was rolled out across the Usk and has shown great results. This year we are offering 7 main river beats through our booking office and one upper Usk beat through our roving voucher scheme. With good marketing and excellent customer service from Seth in the office and flexible terms for fishery owners, visiting anglers are once again returning in numbers to the river and spending their hard earned money on fishing, tackle, accommodation and in local restaurants. In its first year the Passport contributed over £90,000 to the economy of Powys and this year we have already taken over half last years proceeds in the first 6 weeks of the season. The success of this scheme was brought home to us when we learnt that we were one of the three finalists in the Business Awards for Wales - Excellence in marketing category! The results are due at the end of the month and we wait with bated breath.

Plans for this coming year

This year we will continue our fish pass programme by tackling the problems in the Cynrig, Menasgin, Cleisfer and Sorgwm, which will open up a further 36km of stream. In addition to completing the sites we coppiced this winter we are also looking to fence an additional section of the Menasgin and commence works on new sites of the Honddu, Bran and Ysgir. We also hope to continue to expand the number of beats available through the passport.

Funding

The whole project is based on core donations from yourselves. We are hoping to raise £20,000 per year from the river and through contributions from the EA, CCW, Forestry Commission, Brecon Beacons National Park, Keep Wales Tidy, Brecknock Wildlife Trust, and now the MOD, we are able to build this to £168,000. To which Objective 2 adds another £132,000. This means we are able to spend almost £300,000 per year on improving the river. None of this would have happened without the money from the those directly involved with the river and the degree of spend is proportional to the amount you kindly donate. Your donations are the catalyst for this project and every pound donated results in almost £15 being spent on improving the Usk. This surely is excellent value. Please continue to support the project.



Rhiangoll - Before & After



Bran - Before & After

How was the spawning last year?

Nick asked me this question in February and in trying to answer it there are a number of parameters that you need to take into account.

- 1) Were there enough fish in the river to provide enough eggs to fully utilise available juvenile habitat?
- 2) Were the Autumn flows adequate to spread the fish throughout the system?
- 3) Were there any damaging winter spates?

In the case of the Usk last year conditions and runs appear to have conspired to create an almost perfect spawning year.

The fair run of spring salmon was backed up by heavy runs of fish from late summer right through to the end of October. Although there were undoubtedly issues with illegal exploitation that concerned many members, it seems from walking the streams that enough fish made it past the poachers and the rods. The high water through October culminating in the large spate at month end distributed the salmon throughout the main stem and got the trout and the sea trout up the small streams where during November spawning was heavy. In these small streams they are buffered from the effects of large winter spates and I am sure trout recruitment will be good in 2005.

The salmon however stayed in the main stem and lower reaches of the larger tributaries following this spate, and the prolonged November dry spell had us all worried that the excellent run would be wasted by them all spawning on top of each other in the main stem leading to heavy competition between juveniles and a weak year class. Just in the nick of time, the heavens opened and in early December fish flooded out of the main river and into the tributaries. On a Senni tributary, the Treweryn, where one of our work teams were cutting trees, there were 24 salmon redds in just over a mile of 3m wide stream! Fish even got right up to the top of the Ysgir, Bran and Cilieni on the Eppynt range in good numbers (See photo below). So the salmon had penetrated the system and, to really encourage us, redds were apparent above all of the new fish passes installed in the UP! Project.

Better still, the winter rains were steady without any exceptional floods, so egg mortality will have been very low and this has been backed up by our teams reporting large numbers of swim-up fry in the streams. If we can avoid a summer drought 2004 will go down a great spawning season on the Usk and the 2005-year class will be a strong one.

Simon Evans



Spawned hen salmon at over 1000ft in the Eppynt range and a freshly cut redd on the Rhiangoll above the fish pass at Cwmdu

Officers & Committee 2005

Chairman

Nick Brabner
Gliffaes Lodge,
Crickhowell
Powys NP8 1RL
Tel: 01874 731122
brabner@btinternet.com

Vice Chairman

Sir Richard Hanbury Tenison
Pontypool Park Estate Office,
Pontymoel, Pontypool,
NP4 5LE
pontypool.park@farmline.com

Hon. Treasurer

Johnathen P Carthew
Black Mountain Smokery
Leslie Ho. Elvicta Trading Est.
Crickhowell, Powys, NP8 1DF
Tel: 01873 811566
jo@smoked-food.co.uk

Hon. Secretary

Mike Cowburn
The Cwm,
Llantrisant, Usk
Monmouthshire, NP5 1LG
Tel: 01291 672832

Representatives

Tidal Waters to Usk
Mike Cowburn

Deputy

Chris Brain
24 Porthycarne Str., Usk
Monmouthshire NP15 1RY
Tel: 01291 673580
info@chrisbrain-usk.co.uk

Usk to Crickhowell Bridge

Ross Murray
Llanover Estate, 23A Goldtops
Newport, Gwent, NP20 4UL
Tel: 01633 263036
ross@llanover.co.uk

Deputy

Tony Rees
13 Alexandra Avenue
Merthyr Tydfil, CF47 9AE
Tel: 01685 723520
tony@mtaa.freeserve.co.uk

Crickhowell to Brecon

Robert Melvin
7 Park Street
Bristol, BS1 5NF
Tel: 0117 929 0676
rm.a@btinternet.com

Deputy

Charles de Winton
Ty Mawr, Brecon, Powys, LD3 7BZ
Tel: 01874 665493
C_de_winton@ntlworld.com

Brecon to Source

David Jones Powell
Fennifach, Brecon, Powys, LD3 9PH
Tel: 01874 622106
gloria@fennifach.fsnet.co.uk

Industrial Rivers - Vacant

Coarse Fisheries

P Mike Gulliford
305 Llantarnam Rd, Cwmbran
Gwent
Tel: 01633 874472

Deputy

Stewart C Matthews
41 Cardigan Close, Croesyceiliog
Cwmbran, Gwent, NP44 2QN
Tel: 01633 874673
Stewart_c_matt@hotmail.com

WATCH OUT FOR STURIO THE STIRRER!

We tend to forget that the salmon is by no means the biggest fish that traditionally migrates upstream from the sea to spawn in the rivers of Wales. That accolade rests with the common sturgeon *Acipenser sturio*, 'the stirrer', a bizarre and almost forgotten relic of prehistoric times.

Although it is classified as an endangered species because of the detrimental effects of pollution, weir building and netting, the sturgeon is still to be found alive and well in South Wales and the Severn estuary. In fact, the river clearance work now underway on the Usk will not only benefit the salmon and trout population, but it will also encourage the sturgeon back into the river system perhaps with unexpectedly interesting and profitable results.

Alan Jones, for example, a Welsh sturgeon farmer based near Bordeaux where the common sturgeon thrives in the Gironde and Dordogne rivers, last year produced about eight tons of caviar for customers ranging from Marks & Spencer to Petrossian, the famous caviar restaurant in Paris.

The fish itself is said to be delicious, similar to the best veal and smoked sturgeon is reputed to taste better than smoked salmon. In fact, because the sturgeon was considered to be such a delicacy it came under the Crown's protection as a royal fish in the Middle Ages, although it has not actually been served in the state dining room at Buckingham Palace since 1969.

So, when a nine foot long 264 pound sturgeon was caught in a fisherman's net in Swansea Bay last June, the fisherman sought Her Majesty's consent to keep the fish and set in train an extraordinary chain of events.

Buckingham Palace sent a fax by return granting permission to dispose of the sturgeon as the fisherman saw fit, so it was delivered to Plymouth market for auction. A fish wholesaler, known as Moby Nick successfully bid £650 for the fish, just as the police wildlife crime squad, tipped off by DEFRA, swooped down in a dawn raid. The sale of a royal fish, it transpired, is illegal and an offender faces six months in prison and a fine of £5,000.

By this time, Swansea's new National Waterfront Museum, HM Customs & Excise, the Joint Nature Conservation Committee and the Natural History Museum were each squabbling over ownership of the fish. However during the raid, the wildlife crime squad found that mysteriously the fish had vanished without trace.

The British record for a rod caught sturgeon has not been broken since July 1933. Alec Allen was worming for salmon with his friend Edwin on the river Towy in very low water, about sixteen miles upstream from the estuary and about two miles above the tidal limit. At dusk, Alec hooked a submerged log that bent his rod double. The log began to move and then accelerated upstream, stripping line from his reel like a big marlin. After playing the log furiously for nearly half-an-hour, the line went slack and Alec noticed a dark shape heading towards him. He jumped up the bank in panic fearing for his life.

In the gloom, Alec and Edwin peered cautiously over the bank. Suddenly the creature reared up into the air from under the surface and splashed back down again – it

seemed more like a reptile than any known species of fish. Edwin charged down the bank and plunged a long gaff into its side, whereupon the creature turned slightly and a row of armour plates shattered the gaff into matchwood, straightening the big steel hook. A huge tail suddenly broke the surface and lashed Edwin across the back and shoulders, sweeping him off both feet and smashing the rod.

Alec could now see that the stranded creature was foul-hooked in the head - so he lifted a big rock with both arms, lurched into the shallow pool and rendered the tormented creature senseless with a rain of crushing blows to the skull.

Later that night, back at the farm, Alec realised that the creature might be a sturgeon. Now and again estuary fishermen would report incidents of their nets and their coracles being damaged by these fish. Losing no time the following morning, Alec sent a telegram to Buckingham Palace, asking the King for his permission to keep the fish. By return, the palace sent a dusty reply saying that the King was not in residence and was therefore unable to help.

Meanwhile news of the monster had spread quickly. When a retired big-game hunter arrived with a pair of Holland .375 Magnums, the fish had already been trussed up with ropes and hauled up the bank on a makeshift stretcher by a crowd of onlookers. The fish measured over eleven feet in length and weighed 388 pounds with a girth of five feet – the size of a man-eating crocodile. The next day it was sold for £2 to a Swansea fishmonger.

So, the next time your treble hook is snagged in the Usk, it may not be a tree trunk at the other end. If the trunk starts to move briskly upstream, it's just possible that you've foul-hooked sturio the stirrer.

Robert Melvin March 2005

Sturgeon – the facts

- 26 species of sturgeon thrive in Eurasia and North America, but none exists south of the equator.
- The Common Sturgeon, *Acipenser sturio*, was widespread in British coastal waters until about 150 years ago but it is now rare. The common sturgeon can weigh up to about 320 kilograms and can grow to a length of about 4 metres.
- The sturgeon is a bottom feeder. While burrowing into the sand with its snout, four barbels behind the snout search for food. Its mouth forms a hosepipe for sucking up a diet of fish, crabs and molluscs.
- Fossils prove that the sturgeon has changed little over the last 100 million years or so. The sturgeon is protected by rows of bony plates on its back, sides and belly and it retains the original prehistoric tail design once common to all fish.
- The sturgeon leaves the sea in spring when it stops feeding and starts to move up river to its spawning ground. Adults return to sea immediately after spawning while the young fish remain in the lower reaches or the estuary for up to three years before moving out to sea.
- The roe of the sturgeon may be pressed, salted and eaten as caviar. About 18 tons of caviar a year are harvested in France. In the UK the sturgeon is not farmed, nor is any caviar produced commercially.
- The quality of caviar depends largely on the species of sturgeon and its country of origin. The best Iranian or Russian beluga caviar costs up to about £2,500 a kilogram.



United Usk
Fishermen's
Association