

## Angling in the rural environment: Would more anglers be good for our countryside?

The Environment Agency has argued that increasing the opportunities for freshwater angling will have environmental, social and economic benefits. However, if such benefits are to be achieved without corresponding costs, any expansion of angling will require careful management.



Photo by Michael Carrithers

### Policy and Practice Notes

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**An increase in the numbers of anglers would have implications for the natural environment and the rural economy. Although often a social activity, angling is intensely individualistic and diverse: anglers may fish for different species, use a range of different techniques, fish alone or in competition. Governance of the sport is made more difficult as a result, and organisations which need to communicate or consult with practitioners have found this problematic. In order to get recognition and support angling needs to make its case clearly heard.**

## Who goes angling?

**Anglers come from a wide range of social groups. They may fish at commercial day fisheries, buy day passes to fish on rivers, or join clubs, which might be local, work-based or city-based.**

There are now good opportunities for families, older or disabled anglers to fish at new still water facilities. However, club membership is very substantially male, and the membership of large town-based angling clubs is declining, with few young people joining. Women are still very much a minority in angling.

## Would an increase in numbers of anglers have disadvantages?

**Anglers say that the sport is beneficial to their mental and physical health, and this seems to derive from enjoying the natural environment and building up their skills over a long period.**

**Making angling more accessible, whether on rivers, or by increasing the numbers of still waters, might not be beneficial in all respects:**

- A higher density of practitioners might make angling accessible to a larger number but reduce their enjoyment of the natural environment, and the feelings of well-being they derive from the sport.
- As more fishing is carried out on commercial still waters, anglers change from club members to individual consumers, with the loss of social benefits that this entails.
- An expansion of angler numbers, and the current increase in commercial still waters, may degrade habitats, reduce levels of fish welfare and increase numbers of non-native fish.

## Are anglers good for the environment?

**Anglers develop a sophisticated understanding of the environment where they fish:**

- Many anglers keep records of what they catch, and may also record other data such as water temperature and weather conditions, and how changes affect fish feeding and behaviour. These observations also influence how anglers think about environmental change.
- Anglers' knowledge is valued by official and regulatory bodies, which invite angler representatives to sit on management committees. This can provide a useful source of non-professional expertise, although it may sometimes be tokenistic.
- Through clubs and other societies anglers put their environmental knowledge to work, managing their own (leased or owned) waters. For example, they may restock waters with fish following predation or flood events, re-contour river beds or banks because of concerns about fish spawning conditions, or construct banks and in-water features with the aim of improving rivers and lakes for angling.
- Such works may be part of a wider management plan, or they may be carried out by club volunteers informally.

## How does angling contribute to economic development in the countryside?

The growth of commercial still waters has certainly made angling accessible to a wider group of people, and these enterprises provide impressive estimates of annual expenditure by anglers.

However, whether the sport can contribute significantly to rural economic development is less clear:

- The income that angling brings to an area depends upon the distance travelled to fish, and how much the angler then spends in the region. Coarse fishing is often practised by local anglers who spend little, even taking into account expenditure in shops, petrol stations etc.
- There are greater profits to be made from salmon and sea trout fisheries on rivers. Opportunities for development depend upon maintenance of wild stocks and careful management, but these fishermen pay relatively high prices for their sport and it can provide good returns in specific areas.
- Businesses providing angling opportunities fall into two categories: a few relatively large specialised angling concerns, and large numbers of smaller businesses where angling is additional to other household income. The economic contribution of the latter, although small, may be important to the households as part of a diversification strategy to offset the fluctuations in other sources of income.

## What are the implications of the move from rivers to commercial still water fishing?

Over recent years there has been a shift from river angling to still waters, fished by anglers who are consumers rather than club members. However, a wide variety of clubs and other voluntary associations do still exist and most have served several generations of anglers.

**Still waters offer:**

- A more “democratic” and less exclusive environment for novices to get involved.
- A good supply of angling opportunities with a variety of day-ticket fishing.
- Good access for older and disabled anglers.
- Projects to get children involved.

**But may have some disadvantages over traditional river environments because:**

- Older anglers often link the mental health benefits in particular, specifically to their experience of the natural river environment.
- Angling clubs offer social benefits for individuals that may be more limited for users of these large commercial fisheries.
- There are risks to freshwater catchments from still waters because of stocking practices, including stocking with non-native species that may damage sensitive still water habitats.
- There is evidence of a lack of due regard for regulation on the movement of fish, leading to risks from disease and colonisation by non-native species. Loss of stocked fish during flood events may also be a bigger problem than has been realised.
- Newer generations of anglers may perceive highly modified or artificial still waters with modified fish stocks as being natural, so that their expectations of a healthy fish community or aquatic ecosystem may be lowered.

## How can policies widen participation and support the economic, social and health benefits of angling?

There is a complex and ever changing institutional environment and angling may be overlooked.

### Policymakers, angling organisations and anglers need to take action to address this:

- The Angling Trust was formed in 2009 with the intention of representing all angling interests (although the Salmon and Trout Association remains separate) but anglers seem slow to join the new organisation and more has to be done to convince them of the benefits of having a single, representative voice.
- Farmers and other owners of land used for angling require better, more consistent advice and guidance on environmental good practice.
- The angling community, including fishery owners, needs better information and training on the impacts of non-native species, the dangers of disease being spread and the biosecurity measures that businesses and individuals should take.
- Business support ought to be more targeted at small angling enterprises. Many fall beneath the radar of the development agencies and miss out on opportunities that would help them to expand or offer a better service.
- Small businesses could, themselves, help to address this. If they are to benefit from current support mechanisms they will have to cooperate.
- The management of rivers for angling needs to be more coherent, with better partnerships between landowners and with statutory bodies. Rivers Trusts play a useful role in developing these.

## Further information

This research was carried out at the universities of Newcastle, Durham and Hull.

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### Project websites:

<http://www.ncl.ac.uk/cre/aire/>

### Useful resources:

[www.relu.ac.uk/research](http://www.relu.ac.uk/research)

