

Social Aspects of Angling

Angling Participation Research Theme Paper 1



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An Interim Report for the Social and Community
Benefits of Angling Research

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*'A particular feature of coarse angling at the moment is what anglers call 'The Craic'. Typically this is groups of men getting together and having a laugh. I have seen many instances of men using such groups for mutual support of both a material but also spiritual side.'*¹

Background

In essence, angling practice really only needs two parties; an angler and a fish. On this basis it may be hard to think of angling as a social activity, and certain characteristics of angling participation reinforce this view. For example, because anglers don't rely on others to participate, angling is not widely thought of as a team sport in the same way as football or cricket. Angling is also unlike individual-centred activities that require an opponent or fellow competitors, such as athletics or tennis. Indeed, some would argue that the opportunity to participate independently of others is one of angling's greatest attributes.

An analysis of the social elements (and social benefits) of angling participation might therefore be construed as a questionable exercise. However, the reality of angling participation suggests otherwise. A substantial amount of angling participation occurs in the company of other people – friends, family, fellow club members, competitors or team members. Indeed, even when angling is conducted as a solitary pursuit there are usually opportunities – such as before and after a fishing session – for the angler to interact with others.

The process of learning how to fish also has strong ties with social and family networks, as angling skills, techniques and information tend to be passed on to young people from parents, grandparents, friends or extended family.²

It should also be noted that angling participation constitutes much more than just

the physical act of 'going fishing'. Among many other things, angling participation includes reading angling magazines, contributing to angling websites, being part of a club or organisation, coaching or mentoring others, and making your own equipment. When participation is understood in this way, angling actually sustains a robust social world from which a range of positive outcomes are generated for individuals and communities.

This research has identified three key components of angling's social world, offering different benefits to individuals and communities:

- **Formal structures:** such as governing bodies, clubs, associations, projects, trusts, competitions and events.
- **Personal networks and interaction:** incorporating angling events and trips organised for family and/or friends, ad-hoc on-site socialisation between anglers, pre- and post- angling socialisation.
- **Specialist avenues of participation:** social opportunities are often facilitated by activities that are associated with angling participation in some way, such as coaching, writing about angling, tying flies, gathering bait, running or participating in a website or blog, or collecting vintage tackle.

Formal social structures

*'The [local] angling club has become integral to the community, and has help clean up areas and encouraged more wildlife to the site - whilst protecting existing wildlife. There are many benefits to angling; like a lot of sports it can be a way of breaking down barriers between the generations and provide learning opportunities to disaffected youngsters.'*³

Formal social structures can be thought of as organised and 'visible' entities. Examples include the national governing bodies of angling (e.g. The Angling Trust in England or the Scottish Anglers National Association in Scotland), key charities and associations (Salmon & Trout Association, The Wild Trout Trust), angling clubs and specialist groups or

networks. Annual events and competitions, such as the **Scottish Game Fair** and **Fish'O'Mania**, are also significant parts of angling's social world and help to connect angling with the non-angling public.

However, at the local level, the angling club is the traditional heart of angling's social structure in the UK. First and foremost, angling clubs exist to offer and maintain rights to fish waters for the use (and subsequent benefit) of club members. However, in keeping with many other sport and leisure clubs, the members of angling clubs are also usually granted the opportunity to receive information, attend and speak at meetings, and to vote and to participate in democratic structures. These opportunities enable individuals to feel that they have a role as a citizen within the community, help to build social capital, and are likely to contribute to feelings of collective belonging, civil engagement and connectedness⁴.

Unlike the USA where social capital and membership of civic organisations has been reportedly in decline since the 1950s⁵, civic participation in the UK has remained relatively steady⁶ – thanks in part to the formal social structures of sport and recreation activities like angling. Benefits of formal social structures include:

- Being part of a shared voice in political arenas, i.e. lobbying government and organisations about issues that impact on angling.
- Having the opportunity to express opinion to peers, such as being a member of a club.
- The chance to meet others with similar interests (e.g. specialist groups), or in the case of projects who worked with disadvantaged people, the chance to socialise with others who are supportive and empathetic.
- Intergenerational socialisation, particularly in those cases where clubs and societies have both junior and senior elements, or

offer coaching/mentoring to young people.

- Having the opportunity to volunteer and support an angling organisation by taking on a position of responsibility, such as being on a committee, attending a fishery working group, coaching or mentoring others, or filling a bailiff role on local waters.
- Acquiring new skills, either as part of volunteering roles (e.g. gaining administrative skills as part of being a club secretary), or from participation in events or courses offered by the angling organisation (such as learning how to cast or make tackle from a qualified instructor).

Fieldwork for this research included attendance at meetings of three different angling clubs, and the national governing body:

- The Angling Trust Annual General Meeting (AGM) 2010
- Wakefield Angling Club AGM 2009
- Wandle Piscators AGM 2009
- Disley and New Mills Angling Club (DNMAC) Monthly Meeting 2010

Although the Trust and club meetings had considerably different attendance levels and attitudes to formal procedures, there were two elements common to all four of the meetings. The first was some provision for members during the meeting for members to have a 'voice' or 'say'. The second was the pre- and post-meeting socialisation that took place, invariably as conversations between small groups of three or four individuals.

Interpersonal relationships

*'It's something me and my brothers tend to do together, we carry on the tradition that our father passed onto us. It's also a great skill to have. It helps build your concentration levels too. Sometimes even though me and my brothers fish together there will be a moments of silence, but generally we have a good catch up, there's also that element of competition there.'*⁷

Some components of angling's social world are less overt, and have a more personal and informal nature. They are frequently based around the existing social relationships of friends, partners, or members of immediate or extended family. Angling also has a long tradition of intergenerational exchange, with learning often routed through kinship or familial ties. On a number of occasions interpersonal relationships were recorded during the research fieldwork, either as part of interviews or during participant-observation. Some examples included:

- a father and his 8-year old daughter at a Wakefield Angling Club event who both explained that angling was the only one-to-one time they shared together.
- a wife who viewed angling as an activity to be enjoyed with her husband: *'I'm sure it helps with our relationship and sense of well-being'*.
- a grandfather who, following the death of his wife, said that taking his 14-month old grandson angling was an effective way of relaxing: *'What a wonderful bond-builder, and he loves it'*.

Alternatively, social interaction was occasionally observed during research fieldwork as more of an 'ad hoc' engagement brokered between two strangers who, for an hour or two, happen to be sharing a boat, fishing the same stretch of water or part the same working party. In these scenarios, angling participation is a common interest that helps to initiate, maintain or strengthen the relationship.

That informal social interaction of this kind is occurring hints at angling's potential to contribute to community cohesion, insofar as recent research⁸ has argued that one of the key dimensions of community cohesiveness is 'meaningful interaction' between people and groups of different backgrounds. More work is needed to thoroughly investigate this aspect of angling participation; however, whilst fishing there often is a sense of commonality amongst anglers, and this can be the basis for the development of positive relationships and wider community benefits.

Furthermore, certain contexts for angling practice are more conducive to informal social interaction between anglers. Because of the limited space available, sea angling from a pier or jetty, for example, often incorporates conversations between anglers about what they are using for bait, the tides, or what others have caught. There is an element of shared experience/camaraderie that makes fellow anglers open to this sort of social exchange.

Wider aspects of participation

As pointed out at the start of this paper, angling participation constitutes much more than the act of 'going fishing'. Activities like coaching and mentoring, reading blogs, contributing to internet discussion boards, and volunteering for habitat conservation projects are significant parts of participation for some anglers⁹, and they enrich the social world of angling by embracing new social contexts (e.g. electronic media in the case of an internet discussion board) and/or new social actors (e.g. working with local government, landowners, volunteer groups or environmental charities in the case of conservation projects).

Angling clubs and societies often facilitate these additional participation activities. For example, club members might offer structured angling coaching sessions for juniors, or an angling internet discussion

board might be hosted by an angling club website. Members of DNMAC who have an interest in fly fishing run a program of monthly guest lectures, host a fly-tying group and volunteer for working groups on the River Goyt.

The two quotes appearing below were taken from interviews with members from DNMAC members who volunteered for a river bank restoration project. The quotes explore the notion that volunteering for a conservation working group is about more than just getting the work done – it can be both an enjoyable social event and a means by which individuals can meet. These are individuals who, if participation was limited to simply

going fishing, might otherwise have little to do with one another:

*'I think it's a good social day out ... you have a chat to your mates. It's a good social day, [and] a chance to do a bit of fishing ... you get a lot of satisfaction out of it and it's a very pleasurable social experience.'*¹⁰

*'It is a good chance to meet anglers. You are in a club but you don't see the people [other members] very often. You kind of are just there, fishing, and you might walk past someone and say 'Hi, did you catch anything', but that's about the extent of the conversation, really.'*¹¹



Anglers at the Cumbria Fishing Festival look on as Guide Stuart Broadhurst demonstrates how to tie a knot

In focus: Females who like to fish

Research by the Environment Agency (2010) has identified a number of barriers that constrain female participation in angling, one of which is the lack of a social setting in which females feel comfortable and confident. This is particularly important for women trying angling for the first time, who might feel intimidated by the male-oriented ethos of a 'traditional' angling club.

Fishing for Everyone (FFE) is an angling club initiated by Lucy Bowden that endeavours to provide fishing opportunities that appeal to women. Based in the North East of England, FFE concentrates on fly-fishing events, but also provides opportunities for women to sample sea or coarse angling. After interviewing FFE members for this research and watching an angling event at **Chatton Fishery**, an observable strength of FFE is the support and encouragement shared between members. The relatively modest size of the club appears to help cultivate such behaviour, as does the highly social and inclusive manner in which the angling events occur. For instance, at the Chatton Fishery event, all the anglers stopped fishing at the same time in order for lunch to be taken as a group around communal tables. The quotes below are the opinions of two FFE members about the benefits they get from FFE events:

'All the people that I have met have been extremely pleasant and helpful. The outings are very sociable and I like meeting people. I suspect that most women will feel that it is non-threatening: it doesn't matter if they don't know what they are doing ... and it is also safe. If I need some tuition, I know that I can get it on the day.' Bridget, a 43 year-old FFE member.

'I come along to encourage more women to get involved with fishing and I pass on any knowledge I have to women just starting out. I enjoy the banter/chat and Jenny's chocolate cake.' Melanie, a 40-49 year-old FFE member and angling coach.



Coaches help participants set up equipment during an FFE event at Chatton Fishery

Sonia, a 32 year-old female with no prior experience of fly-fishing or FFE, attended the Chatton Fishery event. Sonia explained that she had expected a relaxed tone for the day simply because it was a female-specific event. When asked why she thought this would be the case, Sonia explained that:

'..[I knew it would be] more relaxed in the sense that women generally like to chat a lot! And that – not that there was going to be an element of competition if you were up against males – [but] more that there would be ample time to just talk, and if you didn't care to fish so much you could just talk or 'socialise' as such. Whereas I guess if you put it in the context of having all males and females, it might just revolve around fishing only.'

Conclusions

- Angling offers a number of avenues for social interaction, participation and learning that have wider societal benefits. Clubs and societies represent the more ‘formal’ or organised social opportunities that help individual anglers develop a sense of connectedness and collective belonging. Angling clubs and societies also promote volunteering, and volunteering is not only associated with increased life satisfaction for individuals and communities, but it is a key building block of the government’s **Big Society** initiative¹². Where clubs have a junior membership, they also provide opportunities for intergenerational contact (i.e. through coaching or mentoring). Ad-hoc socialisation is also a key feature of angling participation, especially for sea angling given its popularity in public spaces (e.g. seaside piers) and the lower number of sea angling clubs compared to game or coarse angling.
- Participation in angling needs to be acknowledged as constituting much more than just going fishing. Participation embraces roles like volunteering, coaching, and mentoring; it can be linked to personal education and skill development; and it is expressed through connection to media (reading, writing, watching) and ownership of equipment (collecting). All are phenomena that expand the social world – and social benefits – of angling. Individuals stand to gain the chance to hold positions of responsibility, acquire skills and experience, build social capital, forge friendships and help others. Viewed in this light, the prevailing policy perspective and funding of angling purely as a sport does not capture the breadth of what angling participation entails.
- A sizeable challenge for angling in the UK is the provision of social settings that are ‘family-friendly’. It is worth pursuing because it will encourage mothers, fathers and young people to participate in angling as a shared activity. A recent USA-based study argued that fishing as a form of family recreation is something worthy of further investigation, and that the provision of comfortable facilities (i.e. toilets, shelter) would help to encourage participation among urban residents¹³. Also, the need for permits and rod licences might act as a barrier to family participation, as sea angling (which does not require permits or licences) at Chesil Beach and Whitby Pier were the only times when entire families were observed fishing together.

¹ Online comment submitted to <http://www.anglingresearch.org.uk/>, 10th June 2010

² Wheelock, J., Oughton, E. and Whitman, G. (2009) Well being and the values of angling, Research poster for the *Angling in the Rural Environment* project.

³ Interview comment made by Cheryl, a 48 year-old female and committee member of her angling club.

⁴ For a detailed discussion of the benefits offered by club membership, see Putnam, R.D (1995) *Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital*, *Journal of Democracy*, 6:1, pp.65-78.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Andersen, R., Grabb, E. and Curtis, J. (2006) Trends in Civic Association Activity in Four Democracies: The Special Case of Women in the United States, *American Sociological Review* 71: 376–400.

⁷ Interview comment made by Matt, a 39 year-old male angler.

⁸ Department for Communities and Local Government (2007) *What Works in Community Cohesion? Research study conducted for DCLG and the Commission on Integration and Cohesion*, London Department for Communities and Local Government.

⁹ See Stolk, P. (2009) *The Social and Community Benefits of Angling Interim Report: Angling Participation*. Manchester: Substance.

¹⁰ Interview comment made by Henry, a 67 year-old male who has been a member of Disley and New Mills Angling Club for 4 years.

¹¹ Interview comment made by Charlie, a 60+ year-old male who has been a member of Disley and New Mills Angling Club for 2 years

¹² Halpern, D. (2010) *The Hidden Wealth of Nations*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

¹³ Schroeder, S.A., Fulton, D.C., Nemeth, M.L., Sigurdson, R.E. and Wash, R.J. (2008) Fishing in the neighbourhood: Understanding motivations and constraints for angling among Minneapolis – St.Paul, Minnesota Metro residents, *American Fisheries Society Symposium*, 67, pp.1-19.