

Angling and the Environment

Angling Participation Research Theme Paper 4



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

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*'I love nature in all its forms, and the changes in seasons can be seen at their best near the waterside. People have, in the past, thought angling was boring! I always explain to anybody with that view, that if you get bored with seeing the wonders of the beautiful countryside, the creatures that inhabit it, the clear nights with more stars than you even knew you could see ... then you are bored with life!'*¹

Background

Aquatic and marine ecosystems, and the green spaces adjacent to them, are essential resources for angling participation. Rivers, lakes/lochs, coastlines and the sea are all important settings for the recreational angler, whilst semi-natural habitats, such as canals, reservoirs, ponds, break walls & piers are equally important – and are sometimes easier places to catch fish!

The relationship between anglers and the places they fish is frequently one of mutual benefit – the angler gets to catch fish, observe flora and fauna and spend time next to water, while the environment and the various habitats it supports are watched over, maintained and occasionally restored or regenerated. However it should also be remembered that not all angling is practised in an environmentally responsible way; some anglers leave behind litter after a day's fishing, fail to return undersized fish, or neglect to follow byelaws. These actions not only undermine the reciprocal benefits of the angling-environment relationship but threaten the foundations of the relationship itself.

Benefits that anglers receive from the environment

Just as the quote above suggests, angling participation brings people outside and to the water's edge. As a direct result, anglers get to experience some of the UK's most scenic

locations, and frequently come into contact with a range of animals and plants. For many of the anglers surveyed or interviewed for this research, just being outdoors and immersed 'in' nature are worthwhile experiences in their own right (see the two examples of angler comments printed below). Because these anglers derive such enjoyment from their surroundings, actually catching a fish is often thought of as a 'bonus':

*'I, like many true anglers, go fishing to enjoy the scenery, relax and see nature in its true form. I more often than not don't catch anything, but it is being outside that is the most important thing.'*²

*'Fishing is to be enjoyed and not just about catching 1 or 100 fish. It's about wildlife, the environment, and just being by a lake or river.'*³

As the quotes below illustrate, this research has also collected data that shows how anglers frequently make links between the environment where they go fishing and positive effects on their mental and emotional state:

*'it's very stress relieving to be by the waterside'*⁴

*'being outside helps mentally'*⁵

*'a chance to have some time out in a tranquil setting'*⁶

*'I find being outside is probably more relaxing'*⁷

Given that a lot of angling takes place in 'green space' environments, it could be argued that angling is a gateway activity for people to access green spaces and, as a consequence, obtain the health benefits widely associated with doing so. This theme is explored in more detail in Theme Paper 2: *Angling and Personal Health & Well-being*.

Benefits that the environment receives from anglers

There are numerous ways in which recreational angling participation generates positive impacts on the environment. The key processes are summarised below, and alongside each is an example of practice that has been recorded through research fieldwork.

The 'eyes and ears' of waterways

- Anglers take great pride in being the first to report pollution events or other negative environmental impacts on fresh and salt-water habitats. For example, in September 2010 it was 'sharp-eyed anglers fishing on Grafham Water, Rutland' who observed a new species of fresh-water shrimp. The shrimp was later identified by the Environment Agency as an 'invasive and aggressive species from Eastern Europe'⁸ that poses considerable risk to native ecosystems.
- Anglers and angling clubs are involved in monitoring the health of wildlife and invertebrates, such as participating in fish count events and riverfly monitoring programmes, usually in partnership with other environmental organisations. The Wandle Piscators are a case in point, as they work with the Environment Agency and the Riverfly Partnership to carry out 'health checks' on the River Wandle as part of the nationwide Riverfly Partnership Angler Monitoring Initiative (AMI).

Litter clean-ups and invader clear-outs

- Anglers, angling clubs and angling-related organisations are involved in the planning and conduct of litter and garbage removal from waterways and surrounding land. Similarly, these stakeholders also identify, monitor and remove invasive plant and animal species. The removal of both litter and invasive species occurs in the form of scheduled events and as an incidental part of some angler's participation.

- River and river bank-side clean-ups, and invasive species removal, are activities central to The Wandle Trust. Often in partnership with other environmental charities like Thames 21 and Trout in Town, The Trust calls on a mix of angling and non-angling volunteers to staff in-river clean-up events and invasive plant removal work on different sections of the River Wandle in South London.

Creation, rehabilitation and improvisation

- Angling stakeholders are invariably leading or part of projects that involve improving the quality of aquatic or marine habitat. The construction of new ponds, rehabilitation of existing waterways, stocking fish, and making structural improvements to waters – such as adding fishing platforms to ponds, or fish ladders in rivers – are common examples.
- After purchasing Walker's Dam, Alverthorpe, in 2006, members of Wakefield Angling Club have – with technical assistance from the Environment Agency – transformed the water from a neglected state to a balanced coarse fishery managed by the club. Likewise, during 2009 and 2010 Disley & New Mills Angling Club (DNMAC) members have worked under the guidance of The Wild Trout Trust and the Environment Agency to improve the health of stretches of the River Goyt. This included specific tasks, such as bank stabilisation and the installation of large woody debris.

Sharing the knowledge:

- Anglers contribute to public knowledge of waterways and wildlife in many ways. Some of this environmental knowledge is exchanged informally, as part of conversations amongst anglers, or between anglers and non-anglers. The more formalised channels for sharing environmental knowledge include magazine articles or websites, television

shows, the instruction received via coaches, ghillies or guides, or coursework.

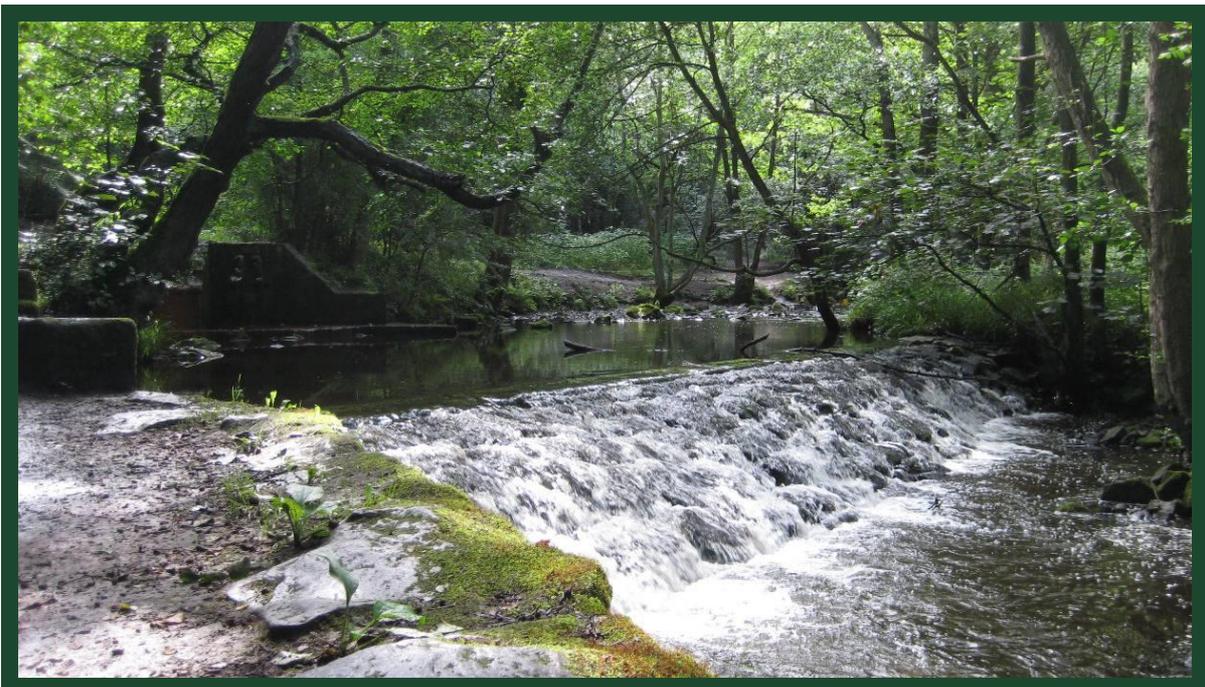
- Anglers, angling clubs and angling organisations have input into more planned sessions of education, training or information sharing. Initiatives like Trout in the Classroom (delivered in South London through The Wandle Trust), **Mayfly in the Classroom** (delivered in England as part of the Trout in the Town programme), **The Brown Trout Big Book** (delivered in Scotland through the Salmon & Trout Association) and Stickleback/Fish in the Classroom (led by the Environment Agency and Leicester University in Leeds, and by Thames 21 in North London) are examples of angling-related groups making contributions to environmental education in primary schools.

Promoting Sustainable Practice

- To ensure the future of fish stocks, and the ecosystems that support those stocks, anglers have a responsibility to participate

in a sustainable, environmentally-friendly manner. Making changes to angling practices so they have minimal negative impact on the environment is one way of achieving this. The widespread endorsement and application of catch & release principles by anglers in wild fisheries is a successful example of such a change.

- To help sea anglers make an informed decision about whether to keep a fish for the table, The Scottish Sea Angling Conservation Network (SSACN) is leading the Give Fish a Chance initiative. Give Fish a Chance is a voluntary guideline for anglers that states minimal landing sizes for frequently caught sea fish species. Some sea angling clubs already have their own competition size limits, and the Scottish government has published minimum landing sizes, however the SSACN claims that 'by adopting these, anglers can be reasonably certain a fish has had at least one chance to breed'.



The River Rivelin near Sheffield is former industrial river that now supports wild brown trout

In Focus: Trout in the Town

Trout in the Town (TinTT) is a community-focused initiative of the Wild Trout Trust that is funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. TinTT aims to *'improve the quality of river habitat in urban areas for the benefit of trout and wider biodiversity, and to raise awareness of wild trout as a totem species for clean water and living rivers'*. The core principles of the Trout in the Town programme are habitat restoration and a commitment to increasing awareness of, and education about, urban rivers. Currently TinTT has projects in both England and Scotland, centred on Huddersfield Greenstreams, Colne Water (East Lancs.), Glazert, Water and the Rivers Wandle, Don, Goyt, Cray, Erewash, Cole, Wye (Buxton) and Irwel. An online map of TinTT projects has been completed as part of this research, and can be accessed at http://resources.anglingresearch.org.uk/data_visualisation/maps/titt

According to Dr Paul Gaskell, the TinTT coordinator, anglers and angling clubs make up around 90% of the Wild Trout Trust membership and are therefore a logical fit to run TinTT projects. However, Paul also believes that anglers are well-placed to champion this kind of initiative because, when compared to other members of the community, anglers place a much greater emphasis on maintaining the health of urban rivers:

'There might be plenty of people that use an urban river corridor, but it would be just as attractive to them if it was a canal and there was a nice towpath and it wasn't sort of biologically diverse...whereas there is a particular value – a particular ecosystem value – that game anglers, and coarse anglers as well, would [place on the river]. They would notice if it [the river] deteriorated, and they'd also feel strongly about trying to protect it.'



DNMAC volunteers prepare equipment for work on the bank of the River Goyt in Derbyshire

The *Social and Community Benefits of Angling* research project has identified the TinTT initiative as an example of best practice angling participation, insofar as anglers who have committed to TinTT projects are involved in activities that deliver wider community benefit, including volunteering, environmental rehabilitation, monitoring of invertebrate and fish populations, information sharing with community members and education of young people. Field visits for the research have been made to TinTT projects at Sheffield (led by **SPRITE**), London (led by the Wandle Trust) and Greater Manchester (led by DNMAC), while 64 TinTT participants have been surveyed about aspects of volunteering. More research focusing on host community perception and engagement is planned for 2011.

Conclusions

- More could be done to increase levels of public awareness about the range of positive environmental actions that recreational anglers are either leading or a part of. This is an issue that was noted by anglers surveyed in 2009 for this research – 30 survey comments specifically argued for improvement in the quality of angling publicity. Such publicity should focus on the non-angling public, as anglers are typically well-informed about such things.

Improving the monitoring and evaluation of the environmental work done by anglers would help inform any publicity work of this kind, as would a greater understanding of how local communities are impacted by environmental work like river clean-ups or removal of invasive species.

- Continue to develop partnerships between angling stakeholders (particularly the governing bodies) and environmental or wildlife organisations and local community organisations. Public partnerships of this nature send an important message to the community about the priority that anglers place on environmental health and minimising environmental impact. The Our Rivers campaigns in 2009 and 2010, where the Angling Trust and Salmon & Trout Association were presented alongside the World Wildlife Fund and the Royal Society for Protection of Birds, are a good benchmark.
- It is not possible to resource the monitoring and policing of all environmentally inappropriate behaviour, so other approaches – like encouraging anglers to adopt environmental best practice – must be used. The Environment Agency, in conjunction with the Angling Trades Association, Angling Trust and National Swan Convention, has codified environmental best practice guidelines to freshwater anglers and fishery owners in several publications⁹, however these documents do not cover sea angling interests. Because sea fishing in England or Scotland does not require a rod licence, there is no public agency or organisation with a mandate to promote best practice. At present it is left to small charities like the SSACN to try and promote environmentally-sensitive behaviour to what is a highly diverse sea angling market. Developing strategic partnerships between sea angling representatives and other stakeholders – possibly with angling retailers or seaside tourist authorities – might be one way of ensuring information about best-practice sea angling is disseminated to holiday-makers as well as enthusiasts.

¹ Comment by surveyed angler, male 32 years.

² Comment by surveyed angler, female 30 years.

³ Comment by surveyed angler, male 64 years.

⁴ Comment by surveyed angler, male 62 years.

⁵ Comment by surveyed angler, male 50 years.

⁶ Comment by surveyed angler, male 36 years.

⁷ Comment by surveyed angler, male 63 years.

⁸ Angling Trust (2010) *All Angler Alert! "Killer Shrimp" on the move*. Media Release, Thursday 2nd December

⁹ For example, see Environment Agency (2010), *Angling and wildlife: Enjoy fishing, follow the Golden Rules*. Leaflet available at <http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk/homeandleisure/recreation/fishing/31487.aspx>