

Dear Minister

I am writing to bring an issue to your attention concerning the impact of estuary netting for salmon and sea trout on our rivers. This relates not only our own home river, the Camel, but also a number of other rivers in the UK such as the Tamar where Net Limitation Orders are in place.

In past times, licensed netsmen on the Camel have taken up to 500 salmon each year. For the past ten years, the netsmen have been paid not to fish during the months of July and August, and the net catch has been in single figures for June. Netting is not permitted after August.

We are also very concerned that the sea trout, which are showing signs of recovery on the Camel, would also be seriously threatened if netting was resumed during the critical period of the main sea trout run in the June, July and August.

During the past ten years, mainly through the activities of the rod anglers but also aided by controls on animal stocking on Bodmin Moor with consequent improvements in flow regimes, salmon and sea trout stocks on the Camel have been recovering. The anglers have introduced controls on bag limits, return 63% of rod caught salmon to the river, operate a hatchery programme whose target is to introduce 50,000 fry each year, improved fishing methods to protect juveniles, improved spawning beds, and removed invasive weeds. The river is currently achieving its spawning target mainly through the work of the anglers.

With recent legislation, rod anglers are not permitted to sell their salmon catch.

In the past, funding for buying off the nets in the summer has been managed by the EA, and there have been a number of external sources for the funds. The EA has now asked our association to fund the whole of the net buyout, currently valued at £1,400 per net, and we have six licensed netsmen. Our funds are severely limited and we can only afford to pay £8,400 annually for the net buyout for a couple more years from our reserves. Our funds come from our anglers and their current annual voluntary contributions go towards paying for the hatchery.

The economics of the equation are straightforward. Each rod caught salmon is valued at about £10,000 (EA Salmon Action Plan 2002 £9,000 plus inflation). In 2009, our salmon rod catch was 350 fish, of which about 200 were returned or went to our hatchery, and this includes those from out of county club members and visitors. We have 500 rod anglers on the river and as you will know, wages in Cornwall are about 15% below national average. We will find it difficult to persuade our members that we have to increase their subscriptions to pay for the nets, when the netsmen themselves contribute nothing to the improvements in stocks apart from their statutory netting license of £250 per year. It seems inequitable, and perhaps even unfair, that the netsmen can kill more fish than our anglers catch, and not make any contribution to enhancing stock levels.

I would draw your attention to the answer you gave in the House on 28th March stating that there is no change to the EA's responsibilities to conserve and maintain the diversity of freshwater fish, salmon, sea trout and eels (and lamprey and smelt) and to conserve the aquatic environment, to enhance the contribution migratory and freshwater species make to the economy, particularly in remote rural areas and in areas with low levels of income.

Cornwall certainly comes within the low income and social deprivation definition, and some of our anglers pay their fishing club dues in instalments because they cannot find the money to pay the £40 subscription in one payment.

We are fully aware that the salmon is an endangered species and we are working hard to ensure that, on the Camel, the work we do recognises the problem and mitigates it. We fear that unless we can find a solution to the problem there is a major risk that unrestricted netting would mean the removal from the river of many mature fish on their way upriver to spawn. We would then fail to meet our conservation limit. It would seem to be a pity if this did happen through our inability to ensure that the river is a shared resource contributing to the local economy and well being of local people.

We would like to suggest a compromise to the current unlimited capacity of the licensed netsmen to take fish. We are aware the fishermen also face hard times and need the income from netting salmon if permitted to do so, or from the buyout if not. Our suggestion is that the licensed netsmen should work within a quota in the same way that they do with offshore fisheries. We believe that a quota of ten or fifteen salmon per net, and a similar number of sea trout, would maintain a healthy and vibrant stock on the river, and adequately compensate the netsmen. Wild salmon can fetch anything from £25 per kilo on the open market. With quotas, the netsmen would be marginally better off than with the buyout. A 9lb wild Camel salmon netted in April last year was sold for £120. During July and August, the smaller grilse would be available with the occasional larger multi winter fish.

In summary, we would suggest that you should direct the Environment Agency to consider the matter of net quotas as a matter of great urgency. It is invidious and even unfair that the full financial consequence of the existing legislation should fall so heavily on only one of the two groups taking fish from the river. There is no logic to having a situation whereby six people paying relatively small net licence fees do nothing to sustain stocks and the whole conservation burden falls on the 500 rod licence holders, many of whom do not kill the fish they catch.

We know that this proposal will need considerable discussion and consultation, and ultimately legislation. However, our Net Limitation Order is due for renewal in 2014 and we would hope that there would have been movement before then to make sure that our river does not fail to meet its conservation target. This would bring further restrictions on both netsmen and rod anglers.

We would be happy to discuss this further with you.