**NORTH EAST**

**GAMEFISHER 2019**

Writing the 2018 article at about the same time last year, I rounded off on an optimistic note: the fishing here in the North East was good and it was about to get better with the new netting Byelaws giving a great boost to our rivers. Sadly, as always the case with fishing, my optimism was entirely mis-placed! Not only were the new Byelaws delayed, but the weather Gods also conspired against us anglers, delivering endless sun rays, but few shadows.

The Environment Agency probably wont publish catch figures until November, but they are unlikely to make happy reading. They will likely reflect the catches on the Tweed, where salmon rod catches fell to levels last seen in the late 1970s and sea trout catches fell well short of a thousand – the lowest for many a year. Although anglers from all rivers appeared equally depressed, at least the fish numbers running the Tyne were pretty much bang on the 5 year average, although not many wanted to play. Rumour has it that even the coastal nets failed to kill as many fish as they hoped, given the low water conditions.

Speaking of the nets, what of the long-promised Byelaws? After several false starts, the Byelaws were finally signed off by the Minister just before Christmas and came into effect at the beginning of this year. The Byelaws mean that the drift nets will close with immediate effect, and the T&J beach nets will operate on a restricted season, although they will still be allowed to fish in the Conservation Areas ie off river mouths. However, all salmon should be released.

The idea behind restricting the length of the season is not to protect the stocks of sea trout, although they are deemed to be “At risk” in some of our rivers, but to minimise the likely damage to salmon caught in the nets. Hence those beach nets in the north of the region, which traditionally catch the most salmon, will only be able to fish until the 31st May, while those off the southern Yorkshire coast, which traditionally caught few salmon, can continue until 31st August. This all sounds most encouraging as most of the 15,000 salmon currently killed off the coast should now be able to return to their natal rivers.

However, 40,000 sea trout may not be so fortunate. Since the Byelaws came into force, it has emerged that the Environment Agency plan to trial a new type of net, which is designed only to catch sea trout and not salmon. Apparently, sea trout get rather over excited when they encounter a net and so quickly entangle themselves, whilst the more serene salmon stay calm. It is claimed that the new style of net will allow salmon to navigate through the escape hatch, leaving the entangled sea trout to their fate.

The trial will operate this year and all T&J netsmen are eligible to participate. Initial interest has been low, but the netsmen do have until the end of the new netting season to volunteer. The trial will over the old netting period (ie until 31st August) in all areas. The Environment Agency state that the trial will be subject to “robust monitoring”. The details of this are currently vague. There is talk of using video and photographs of salmon and sea trout behaviour as they encounter the net but no word of how extensive this will be. There is also talk monitoring records kept by participating netsmen and “land based observations” of netting operations and catches.

The cynics amongst you will probably be thinking that a couple of EA fisheries officers will probably have a trip out from Whitby on a sunny day in August to see very little. Meanwhile, the netsmen will simply have to write “None” on a regular basis in the box beside “How many salmon caught?” in order to win the prize of being able to plunder the sea trout for the rest of their days. You could well be right.

The trial will be assessed post August. If it is deemed to be a success, then there will be more new Byelaws, subject to consultation of course, to allow the beach netsmen to carry on as before but with the new net. So it is perfectly possible that all those sea trout saved from the drift nets will simply be killed in the new style beach nets. If it comes to pass, it will be a tragic missed opportunity and waste of a great natural resource.

Whilst it is easy to knock the EA, I must give credit where credit is due. Throughout the long process of reviewing the Byelaws and implementing the new ones, local EA staff have performed beyond the call of duty. They have, without fail, responded rapidly to requests for information. They have also always been willing to meet with interested parties, which normally take place in the evening. Many of the meetings with anglers have hardly been plain sailing, and I suspect that the same is true of the meetings with netsmen! They have managed the process with good humour and good grace. Thank you.

Another area of recent concern has been the resurgence of main river hydro schemes over the last few months. Some of these have fallen by the wayside, but others are still in play. Will they be detrimental to upstream and down stream fish movements? I find it rather hard to assess when looking at a scheme on paper and hope others, more expert, can make a proper assessment.

Recent experience on the Wear and elsewhere suggests that there is plenty of room for improvement on old designs. Let us hope that the lessons have been learnt and the new designs do do what they say on the plan. The concept of generating energy from water whilst having no environmental impact is clearly a good one, but can it be delivered on our rivers?

So what will this season bring? After my ridiculous optimism of last year, the only option is to adopt a more negative thought process. All our juveniles have been eaten by goosanders. Most returning adults will be killed in the nets. In the unlikely event of there being enough water to allow the survivors into our rivers, they will be screwed by Archimedes. That should do it – tight lines!