**GAMEFISHER 2018**

**NORTH EAST**

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Those of you with a sharp memory will no doubt recall this column in last year’s Gamefisher, in which Matt Ridley recounted the sorry tale of the Environment Agency’s report into the North East coast net fishery. He closed his article by stating that this mixed stock fishery should be closed down in order to meet the UK’s international obligations, but that there was a chink of light in that the Environment Agency was to review the Net Limitation Order during 2017.

As we now know, this “chink of light” morphed into a warm beam of golden sunshine as the Environment Agency, eventually, launched its consultation into the future of all salmon fisheries in England and the Border Esk. I must confess that I was somewhat sceptical. The focus had been lost from the North East net fishery as the consultation had expanded to cover all net fisheries as well as rod fisheries. The consultation was lengthy and seemed to require manual analysis. Surely an exercise in kicking the issue into the deep water?

Happily, my scepticism seems misplaced. An initial response was released by the Environment Agency in early February. It all seemed most encouraging though the Devil would no doubt be in the detail, due “by the end of February”. As the deadline for this article was mid-March, my main content was secure! But the days ticked by and I began to sweat. However, I need not have worried as the Environment Agency was only a week late in publishing the new Byelaws, although they are still subject to further consultation.

On the assumption that they will remain much as initially published, I make no apologies for banging the drums of celebration while performing a victory dance! I know that there are anglers elsewhere who are not happy with their lot, but this article is headed “North East” and North East it shall be – loud and proud. After all, we have had to suffer for years from our migratory fish being killed in their tens of thousand along our coast and in the sea beyond.

To recap, the 11 remaining drift nets were due to cease operations in 2022, while the fixed beach nets (T&J nets) were under no time limit but a gradual decline was planned as the licences are non-transferable. In 2016, these nets accounted for nearly 19,000 salmon and 39,000 sea trout.

The proposed Byelaws should mean that drift netting will cease immediately and greatly reduced T&J netting from 2019. On the beaches of the North East, the netting season would end on 31st May, as opposed to 31st August now, all salmon would be released, there would be no netting at night and the no-netting zones near river mouths would be greatly extended. In this region, the restrictions on anglers hardly seem unreasonable compared to what we should gain in additional fish.

In amongst my celebrations, I must confess to a nagging sadness, which may surprise those that know that I have been lobbying for these changes for a number of years. I began my salmon fishing career in the late 1970s when the main expedition was in July to the river Shin. Each morning we would travel to the river via Bonar Bridge where, tide allowing, we would pause and watch the netsmen in the Kyle. The fish boxes would be piled high, with articulated lorries awaiting to take them south. We would watch the netsmen drag in their haul of silver and fill those boxes.

Were we appalled by the slaughter? Not at all. It was enthusing as it gave an idea of the size of that morning’s run and the sport to follow that day. What it would be to return to those days when there was enough to go around for both netsmen and anglers! Will those salmon spared by these Byelaws really make a difference? I do hope so, but fear that any bounce in rod caught numbers will be short lived as it was following the main drift net buy out. There seem to be other forces at work, so far not really understood, to the detriment of our salmon.

However, I am very excited at the prospect of the reduced exploitation of our sea trout and what that will mean for our North East rivers, large and small. If a goodly percentage of the c40,000 currently killed off our coast are allowed to reach their intended rivers, we should see a resurgence in sea trout fishing across the region, with associated benefits for the wider rural economy.

The T&J nets do much of their work within casting distance of the beach. I know that the North Sea might not be quite as glamorous as the Caribbean or the Indian Ocean, but salt water fly fishing is a fast-growing section of the sport, in the UK as well as further afield. In Denmark and other parts of Scandinavia, salt water sea trout sport fisheries have been developed, so why can’t we do the same here? The presence of so many sea trout within a cast of the beach must give a good chance of success. The netsmen seem to have got rather good at knowing where the fish are and when, so could they take the lead in developing summer sport? It would do more for the regional tourism offer than a pile of boxes on the quay.

Meanwhile, I will continue to assist the Northumberland Rivers Trust in its work to improve our riparian habitat and remove obstacles for our migratory fish. All the river trusts across the region are doing great work to ensure that our rivers are as good as they can be for our returning fish, utilising local knowledge and volunteers to gain the maximum return from the funds available. Long may it be so.

In the dark days of winter, it can be easy to get depressed about the state of our fish stocks, but for those of us lucky enough to live and fish in the North East, there are reasons to be cheerful. The Tynes are fishing very well indeed, with run numbers holding up and the quality of the fish being exceptional. The Wear and the Coquet are not to be sniffed at, and we are now seeing increasing runs in rivers that were obstructed, such as the Wansbeck.

If the Byelaws are introduced as published, we should see a significant improvement in the sea trout fishing in the region, including the recovery of rivers such as the Aln and hopefully a new salt water sport fishery. So, there is much for us fisherman to be optimistic about, or at least there is here in the North East.