Virtual Fisheries Forum 24/03/21 – North East EA Fisheries Updates

Q&A Session with Phil Rippon & Jon Shelley

Q. Do you release water into the Tees to combat oxygen deficit?

> A. Phil Rippon: No – there aren't any reservoir releases of water to combat oxygen deficit on the Tees. The Tyne has been particularly targeted for extra releases due to the history of problems with salmon deaths in the estuary – something which has never been observed in the Tees. Moreover, the Tees doesn't have a large enough bank of water as far as I'm aware, so there wouldn't be the infrastructure to allow substantial releases like Kielder can do.

Q. How was the reduction in migratory licences split between season and short-term?

> A. John Cheyne: In terms of annual migratory licenses, there were no reductions other than the senior citizen category – all other categories were either steady or growing. For the short-term permits, the majority of downturn was again in the senior citizen category. 1 day adult licenses were up by 10%.

Q. Perhaps the most common issue raised by Anglers on the River Wear are the huge annual movements of gravel downstream and associated bankside erosion and siltation. There is real concern for spawning areas upstream due to the volume of gravel migrating annually. 1. Is anything being done to monitor this situation. 2. Is there anything that can be done by way of remedy - many Anglers are aware of gravel being replaced in upstream areas on some UK rivers. 3. What would be the best way to go about getting something done about this matter?

> A. Phil Rippon: That's a good question, because erosion of course is a natural process which you need for ensuring gravel can enter rivers and therefore create spawning habitat – but on the other hand, too much erosion caused by poor land management can lead to problems as you describe. So it's really a fine balance between enabling a river to move naturally, letting the gravel move, letting the pool and riffle sequences form like they're supposed to do, but not overly-eroding river banks at the same time. So the way forward with all of this is to develop projects which look at natural floodplain management, create braided channels and to not try and nip rivers in, not use hard engineering techniques, and let the river evolve as naturally as possible. The gravel movement per se is not such a big issue, but erosion in the wrong places is. With all the infrastructure we have along rivers such as bridges, footpaths railway lines etc that need to be protected, it is often the case that

protection in its own way can lead to the problems. Gravel introduction schemes usually relate to reservoirs to compensate for the material which can no longer move downstream. For the Wear I'm not sure how viable a scheme like this could be, but it is something we may consider if loss of gravels becomes a serious issue for fish.

Q. Is there any update on the issue with the water diversion and abstraction at the Pont Transfer near Matfen to Whittle Dene?

A. Phil Rippon: A fish pass has been created by Northumbrian Water at the diversion point, so there should at least now be opportunity for fish to move from the Pont past that diversion structure which goes into Whittle Dene and into the top end of the Pont.

Q. There's been no mention of the Coquet evulsion at Caistron. How satisfied are the EA that smolts in particular but also adult salmonids will be able to traverse the new course of the river?

A. Phil Rippon: We are very confident that smolts and adult salmonids will be able to traverse this new course of the river. The last time we were on site, there were no obstructions to fish passage either upstream or downstream. Both Jon and I have been quite heavily involved in this. Many on this call will know this area of the Coquet valley very well – it's a geomorphologist's delight with such a wide glacial floodplain and masses of gravel. Looking at LIDAR images or aerial photos, the amount of movement of the river channel over past decades is quite incredible. On this occasion the river has moved into an old gravel quarry, effectively drying out what was around 100m of the old river channel, but creating 300-400m of new channel through the lake. We kept a very close eye on it with drones and persons on the ground – there was some strong concern about flood risk because we didn't know quite how the lake or river would react. From our point of view, we were keen to be on standby in case fish rescues were required on areas of the old channel – so myself, Jon and others took the electrofishing gear up and rescued around 300 fish and relocated them to the new channels. The habitat in a year or two will look fantastic – we've lost a section of river but now have a larger section with better habitat, natural meanders etc. It could have gone in a number of different ways, but this river will always evolve. We will continue to monitor as time goes on.

Q. Have you any forthcoming consultations in this area?

A. Jon Shelley: We're looking somewhat to the future. Either towards the end of this year or early next year we will need to consult with all interested parties on the replacement for the 2012 Net Limitation Order. The current order restricts the number of licenses we issue for sea trout nets on the coast from

Berwick down to Spurn Point to those licensees who already have a license are operating within the sea trout fishery. And that order expires in December 2022, so we need to have a new order to replace the 2012 – this process usually takes around 12-18 months from start to finish. So around November/ December this year will be the most significant bit of consultation.

Q. I understand that the Kielder release program has been reviewed, in the context of the dry springs for the last 4-5 years. Can you let us know if any changes are planned and what they would be?

A. Phil Rippon: I'd have to speak with hydrology colleagues. There were some changes due to Storm Desmond that resulted in Kielder having to be kept at a certain level to protect lives and property. Releases were also changed in light of the fact that there were more summertime releases we specifically requested for dry weather in past.

Q. Any roach or chub stockings planned for the Tyne?

A. Phil Rippon: Every year we review where and why for stockings. Usually river stockings are only done in response to pollution incidents or where there is issue with fish passage. We have stocked roach and chub into the Tyne in the last 5-10 years so we'd have to review whether it's appropriate to stock any more. I know chub are doing well on the Tyne but roach struggle due to the power and flow of the river. Our stocking policy is under constant review however so we will look into this.

Q. Given Covid restrictions can the EA give an overview of when the T and J nets operated on the NE and Yorkshire Coast last year please. What sea trout and salmon were caught by the nets?

A. Jon Shelley: There were no specific restrictions on netting last year so licensees were able to operate according to the standard seasons. Ultimately to as long as the end of August, the same amount of season available to people. Effort was lower but only due to associated problems with covid eg lack of demand from hospitality industry to service, transportation etc. The 2020 sea trout catch was 10902 fish - of those only 798 were caught in district 1 and around 10100 were caught in the Yorkshire fishery. To give these figures some frame of reference, we only need to go back a few years to 2015 when the same nets caught almost 60 000 sea trout - so in 6 years we've gone from a catch of 60k to 10k which represents a very significant fall on the impact of the net fishery – so this is potentially 50k more fish getting back to contributing rivers. This is partly due to fishing effort - back in 2012, there were 62 T and J nets, 14 drift nets and 76 licenses in total. Since then the drift net fishery has closed, and there are only 40 T and J nets. Of the 40 that took

out a license last year, 15 licensees didn't fish so there were only 25 active nets.

Q. Could you clarify the comment about collecting 20 K salmon eggs in 2020 - is that the basis for next year's stocking program?

A. Phil Rippon: The agreement is to have 160k parr ready to stock – due to restrictions on how we work this year it wasn't possible to collect the normal number of fish – however we are intending to make up this loss over the next few years to make sure we're on back on track.

Q. Could the EA give an update on fish passage Riding Mill weir and counter please?

A. Phil Rippon: The counter has been functioning correctly from August. we are currently working on the overspill weir with Northumbrian Water to see how fish are responding to this new structure and to establish what if anything need to be done at this site.

Q. There is a new bridle way crossing on the R Rede, nr. Monkridge ,how has it been designed so it doesn't obstruct fish going up the river to Otterburn?

A. Jon Shelley: Crossing point is at Smoutle Ford where as part of the Revitalising Redesdale project, bridleway access was changed. Previously, there was some concern over a crossing which generated silt and was causing problems. A new artificial riffle created has since been creasted downstream to enable horses to cross during low flows in such as a way that doesn't impede fish passage. It's something we have been consulted on and the work won't have been carried out unless it was ecologically sound.

Q. Since the Tyne is the most successful salmon fishery in England, partly due to the Kielder hatchery why has the stocking of salmon parr been reduced with no stocking of the South Tyne whatsoever recently?

A. Phil: We have to adhere to our own guidelines when conducting stocking programs which relate to considering the genetic integrity of fish, where they've come from, how they're collected, numbers of adult fish, the way the pair mating works etc. It's hard to maintain a certain number of fish to be stocked within our current guidelines that we have for pair mating, so it would ~~n't~~ seem sensible that we compensate for the loss due to Kielder reservoir using fish from the North Tyne because that's where they were going in the first place. We collect x amount of male and female fish to replenish stocks that can no longer access spawning habitat above the reservoir. We have that obligation to stock 160k parr which is part of our agreement with

Northumbrian Water. The fish which had been stocked above this number in years past were to compensate for loses in the Tyne estuary when oxygen levels were low – but as mentioned previously we have successfully managed to combat this with extra releases from Kielder, therefore negating the need to stock more fish. Juvenile fish must go back to the areas that they came from – you can't put fish that came from the North Tyne into the South Tyne because genetically that would be a really bad idea. Also need to be aware that we can only stock for mitigation – so no longer any dead fish to mitigate. However we are constantly reviewing these policies and they may change in future.

Q. Have any lessons been learned from the River Severn findings by the EA that can be applied to the situation on the North East coast?

A. Jon Shelley: Challenges from the case of Mr Mott operating a rank of putchers as part of his business operations, we across the Environment Agency try and manage our fisheries in a balanced and fair way that complies with all the requirements of our policy guidance at the time – there is a careful balance to strike between the need to conserve vulnerable fish stocks and allow sustainable exploitation of any harvestable surplus that those stocks provide. We are operating on the same framework with same considerations in mind but the Yorks/ NE fishery is a unique fishery with a unique set of circumstances and so operates in a different way. We will continue to regulate in a fair and balanced way – in past we have offered compensation to fishermen who have been negatively impacted. Conservation of fish stocks at the heart of all our decision making.

Q. I'm a member of a trout, grayling and coarse angling club on the River Derwent just upstream from Swalwell roundabout. There aren't too many coarse fish about in our coarse fishing stretch just above Swalwell, but there are lots and lots of small dace below the bridge. Would the EA consider transferring some of these dace into our coarse stretch.(Phil they've been there for a very long time and they don't move upstream at all)

A. Phil Rippon: Would hope that we have 2 new fish passes on the lower Derwent (modern, Larinier style fish passes suitable for a range of species) which should allow dave to populate the upper Derwent if they want to do so naturally. Those juvenile dace in the lower Derwent were probably washed out from the lower Tyne itself, but the new fish passes should allow for dace to colonise these other stretches.

Q. There was an item on Facebook recently about some work by the Angling Trust and the Environment Agency clearing some tree trunks and branches from a North East River. Where was this and could the material not have been left in place as habitat and cover from predation?

A. John Cheyne: AT doesn't have staff doing in river work so this may have been a miscommunication somewhere along the line.

A. Phil Rippon: I was forwarded this article which showed a blockage on a small stream. I totally agree with Peter's sentiments over the need to remove blockages woody debris etc since so much is provided for fish, however there are flood defence reasons and many urban streams need to have blockages removed. Speaking as an ecologist these things should be left in situ. Perhaps not the best worded piece for social media.

Q. Are there any recent AT initiatives or new techniques to help with Cormorant control on inland fisheries?

A. John Cheyne: Angling Trust employ 2 full time Fisheries Management Advisers who can help clubs and fisheries with protecting their waters from cormorant predation. We also have the Angling Improvement Fund which is awarding grants of up to 5k for measures which help prevent predation related damage to fisheries e.g floating islands. We ran a virtual forum about this last week which you can see details of here.

Q. Early days but any views on the proposed Hydro scheme which has apparently re surfaced for Hexham weir? Any concerns for fish welfare and passage?

A. Phil Rippon: Every hydropower application must conform to our guidance and we will be ensuring its compliance with fish passage and welfare. This is a very new development however and we are still awaiting further details.

Q. Will there be a Dace survey conducted on the Tyne/North Tyne this year?

A. Phil Rippon: I hope so and am looking forward to getting out there myself and catching some of these massive North Tyne Dace. Niall Cook is the main organiser for the event – as soon as we have information for this we will be advertising and ensuring people with previous involvement and others are able to take part.

Q. Given all the dispute about the contribution of stocking to the Tyne salmon fishery would it not be worthwhile to study the impact of stocking in the same way as was done on the Spey for example reported at IBIS meeting in Glasgow in 2012 I think? So we know the stocking is not a waste of money!

A. Phil Rippon: It's been a long time since things have been done on this front - hatchery changes, survival of fish have improved etc. Currently there is no funding to do this and perhaps it's something we need to get to grips with in future. The only fish that get marked these days at Kielder hatchery is the

smolt trap – they are caught and do return. It's a very big bit of research and we do need to look into genetic marking to figure out the contribution of hatchery fish.

Q. Phil; having commissioned the excellent report on the state of the fish passes on the Wear will we see the changes to the passes on the bottom weir implemented this year?

A. Phil Rippon: Yes – improvements are scheduled for this calendar year. Every intention to get going as soon as possible.

Q. Why is genetic integrity even an issue? Kielder used stock from all over the country to restock the tyne, the Tyne had virtually no salmon in the 1950's?

A. Phil Rippon: This is a bone of contention – some argue that there were returning salmon while others argue they have only re-established due to stocking… We could look for traces of original stocked fish through genetic work or look into whether there was that residual stock of Tyne fish that went unnoticed. Genetic integrity is key for sustainable fisheries in future and we should be working towards with all fish. In the case of Kielder we cannot get rid of the dam and so stocking to mitigate will remain for the time being