

The Perennial Debate

By Ralph Clark

Angling is a sport full of opinions; however, there is one issue that creates more passionate debate than any other and that is the coarse fish close season on rivers. In general there are two camps, those in favour and those against. Very few people seem to sit on the fence on this issue as far as I can make out.

Over the years I have listened and taken part in a number of discussions on this subject and it is quite apparent that the two sides are “poles apart” vigorously opposed to each other’s point of view. It’s my opinion that while there is this position of “stand-off” the sport of angling will drift aimlessly, getting nowhere on what is an important issue. Eventually what might happen is that someone outside the sport will make the decision for us, and believe me we don’t want that! It’s an angling problem and those within angling should resolve it themselves.

So let’s take a look at both sides of the argument. For simplicity, I’ll call those who feel a close season is necessary ‘Traditionalists’ and those against ‘Modernists’.

Traditionalists

This group argues that: -

- It’s ethically and morally wrong to catch spawning fish



- The countryside shouldn’t be disturbed during its period of regeneration
- Handling fish at such a time will cause them both unnecessary damage and stress
- Some anglers will specifically target those areas where the fish congregate to spawn in their attempts to capture them
- If we change it will give the antis more ammunition against us
- We don’t want change in the current legislation at any cost

Modernists

This group argues that: -

- The current close season is outdated and outmoded
- Anglers should be able to fish anywhere and at anytime of the year
- Fishery managers should be able to decide if and when they close their waters as they understand them best
- There is no scientific evidence to support a close season on rivers
- Times have changed since the close season was introduced 125 years ago

I’m sure you’ll agree that both sides have valid points of view if a neutral position is considered. However, I

believe that we need to look more closely at why the coarse fish close season was originally introduced. At this time coarse fish were both caught and killed either for food or sport and this took place throughout all the months of the year. It became apparent to some anglers that this situation was not sustainable and eventually this approach would decimate the freshwater fish stocks. So, after much discussion, legislation was introduced and the 93-day coarse fish close season as we know it today came into existence to “protect coarse fish stocks from exploitation”.

Examining the problems

Certainly times have changed since those days and today coarse anglers always return their catch alive to the waters from which they were caught. But I believe the issue of protecting coarse fish stocks is as relevant today as it ever has been as they are being threatened by man’s activities in other more insidious ways. Consideration must be given to the fact that rivers hold populations of indigenous wild fish and to maintain these viable populations they must be self-sustaining. River fish populations cannot be managed in the same way as fish in enclosed waters, which is why natural recruitment in rivers is so important. There is also a need to protect the integrity of a river’s “gene pool” in the interests of biodiversity as similar species in different rivers may be exploiting subtly different niches in their environment. Therefore the artificial

stocking practices that are carried out on stillwaters should not be considered on rivers as being an option to boost flagging fish populations unless a wholly justifiable need is required. You only have to pick up any of the angling publications that are around today and somewhere on the pages you will find the authors bemoaning the fact that our rivers “aren’t what they used to be”, “the silver fish have all disappeared” and many other such statements. So it would appear that anglers have identified that something is wrong with our river systems and these problems seem to be endemic throughout the country. Why should this be so, I wonder?



We are told that our rivers are much cleaner today than they used to be, so maybe some of the pollutants that once affected our waterways are no longer of any relevance which has to be good news I’m sure you would agree. However, it’s quite obvious that something is still wrong and I suspect that the following areas are where we should be looking for the answers.

We all know that over the centuries man has been messing around with and destroying riverine habitats, the reasons for this are many; milling, land reclamation, farming practices, development, flood defence and navigation are all fine examples. This probably means that there are very few,

if any, truly natural river channels in the country that have been left untouched by man in some way. As a result of all these activities important features such as spawning habitat within rivers have disappeared. Rivers have been split up into separate reaches by mills, weirs and other controlling and impounding structures, this effectively prevents fish from moving freely and stops them reaching perhaps the only available spawning sites within a river. This is likely to result in reduced and fragmented fish populations. Impoundments have also meant that suitable spawning habitat may have been drowned out, also siltation from excessive soil erosion coupled with low flow rates means that deposition of silt may be smothering river gravels. These alterations mean that often, throughout their length, rivers are suffering from a lack of true gravel riffles that flow-loving species such as dace, chub and barbel require for spawning.

So we can see that rivers today are likely to have comparatively poor spawning habitat for many fish species. As suitable spawning sites are therefore limited spawning populations can and do regularly congregate on certain sections of river and compete for the same available space. Generally, the dace arrive first in March, followed by chub in April and the barbel in May or June. Depending on the water temperature and flow conditions, some or all of these species are likely to be utilising similar habitats over the same period and this will inevitably result in some failure in recruitment success.

Other factors that are likely to impact on recruitment success of river fish are water quality issues such as discharges from

sewage treatment works. It has recently been identified that roach living close to sewage treatment works are being effected by endocrine disruption. Man-made chemicals known as endocrine disruptors interfere with the way endocrine (hormonal) systems function in both humans and animals. Hormones control essential bodily processes such as growth, metabolism and reproduction. It's been discovered that male roach are being affected by oestrogenic endocrine disruption (feminisation). Such affects to the male gender are likely to impact heavily on recruitment success of this species particularly if they live in the proximity of sewage treatment works. It has been identified that incidences of disruption on male roach are linked to the dilution levels of the effluent entering the river. This means that if a river's water is made up of a large percentage of treated effluent then the more likely it will be that roach are affected by hormonal disruption. Consideration must also be given to the fact that if roach are being affected by this condition it's also possible that other yet unidentified fish species are also at risk.



Juvenile fish are also at risk from poor water quality as they are less tolerant to chemical changes in the water. If a single slug of ammonia from a sewage treatment works passes down a river without any one really noticing it can wipe out whole year classes of juvenile fish. Also there is an apparent lack of invertebrates within rivers, juvenile fish feed on these invertebrates and their decline in the ecosystem may be

hindering young fish from reaching maturity. The reasons for declining invertebrate populations may include pollutants which affect their reproduction and survival. Often there is a lack of suitable habitat for juvenile



fish throughout many river channels. It's probable that these small fish are being washed away during severe flood conditions again without anyone noticing. It becomes obvious then that

and juvenile fish mortality means that exploitation of spawning fish by angling would be a detrimental factor in recruitment success of coarse fish populations in rivers.

It would therefore seem that these factors alone are evidence enough to justify a coarse fish close season on rivers. This supports the view put forward by the "Traditionalists" and I suspect that even the "Modernists" would find it difficult to argue against the facts as they are presented. Also, with the current political climate coupled with the fact that the Government doesn't have the "political will" to spend the money on addressing many of

“We can see that rivers today are likely to have comparatively poor spawning habitat for many fish species”

backwaters, bays, tributaries, side streams and ditches that once formed an intrinsic part of a river system are extremely important in a fish's lifecycle. Such habitat features provide refuges for the juvenile fish enabling them to survive during such conditions. These features have often been destroyed during flood alleviation schemes or they have become neglected or mismanaged.

Summing up

So although the initial issues for protecting coarse fish stocks by enforcing a close season to ensure their sustainability have changed, it becomes quite apparent that coarse fish stocks still require the protection that a close season offers. The lack of suitable spawning habitat and obstructions that restrict the free migrations of fish caused by river controlling structures inhibits their natural recruitment. Also other factors such as endocrine disruption

the environmental problems our rivers and fish face, it becomes obvious that this is a situation that is unlikely to change for a very long time.

The way forward

The recommendation, therefore, which must be put forward in this debate is that coarse fish populations in river systems should be self-sustaining and supported entirely by natural recruitment. There should be no necessity to maintain fish populations in rivers by artificial stocking except in exceptional circumstances. Therefore, the precautionary approach should be adopted and a close season for coarse fishing should apply to rivers. This is provided by current legislation in the form of the traditional close season period 15th March to 15th June. It suits the purpose and is considered to be a good compromise for protecting all riverine fish species.