Angling Trust
Eastwood House
6 Rainbow Street
Leominster
Herefordshire HR6 8DQ

t: 0844 770 0616
e: admin@anglingtrust.net
w: www.anglingtrust.net

Reg Address: Angling Trust Ltd
Eastwood House
6 Rainbow Street Leominster
Herefordshire HR6 8DQ
Reg No: 05320350
VAT No: 948411215

Angling Trust
Action on Predation

Introduction

The Angling Trust recognises that there is a serious problem with predation of fish by cormorants, goosanders and otters, as well as invasive non-native species such as mink and signal crayfish, on many still water fisheries and rivers. Predation is natural, but on rivers which are suffering from pollution, low flows, habitat damage and invasive non-native species, it can have a devastating impact on fish stocks. Stillwater fisheries are particularly vulnerable to predation, particularly those with specimen fish that are highly valuable. Action to manage this problem is required, and the Angling Trust has made significant progress in some areas. However, wildlife management is a very delicate political issue and the Angling Trust has a very serious duty to protect the reputation of angling in the public eye. Any demands the Trust makes of government must be realistic, achievable and not significantly damaging to the reputation of angling.

Cormorants and Goosanders

The Angling Trust has concluded negotiations with the Government on the implementation of new measures, announced last year, to improve the protection of vulnerable fish stocks from predation by cormorants and goosanders. The Trust campaigned for more than three years for a change to the current bureaucratic and ineffective licensing regime that governs the lethal control of these birds, which can eat between 1 and 2 lbs of fish every day, collectively more than 1,000 tonnes every winter.

The new measures will include:

- The funding of three fisheries management advisors (FMAs), to be employed by the Angling Trust from April 2014, to help angling clubs and fishery owners reduce predation, to co-ordinate applications for licences across catchments and to gather better evidence about the number of birds in each catchment;
- A commitment by the government to review the existing national limit on the number of cormorants that can be shot each year in light of evidence gathered by the FMAs from each catchment in 2014 and 2015;
- A simplification of the licence application form to make it easier for fishery managers to apply to control cormorants and goosanders;
- A removal of monthly limits within an annual licence;
- Extension of the control season to May at times of low flow when salmon and sea trout smolt migrations are particularly vulnerable;
- Agreement to increase the national limit for cormorant controls to the emergency level of 3,000 (from 2,000 last year) in 2014/5 if the need can be demonstrated.

The Trust pressed for adding cormorants to the general shooting licence (along with pigeons, crows, magpies etc.), subject to an annual review to ensure the conservation status of the birds was not threatened, but the Government resisted this. However, the Trust is now satisfied that the new arrangements will make a significant difference to protecting fisheries from unsustainable predation, following a commitment from Ministers in a recent letter to the Trust that they will review the national licence limits should demand from the catchments prove this to be necessary.

Signal Crayfish

Signal Crayfish are an invasive non-native species. They burrow into banks and predate on invertebrates, fish eggs, fish and vegetation. They are fast breeders and rapidly colonise new waters.

The Angling Trust and CEFAS (the Centre for Environment, Fisheries & Aquaculture Science) have joined forces to trial a number of methods to find the most effective way of reducing signal crayfish numbers and their impacts on our aquatic wildlife. The Defra-funded project is supported by an army of volunteers from angling clubs and others with an interest in the conservation of their local rivers, lakes and canals.

The volunteers are supported by CEFAS scientists who will analyse the results of the study. The aim is to produce a guide to water managers on the most efficient way of reducing signal crayfish numbers. The study will also provide some useful insights into the challenges and opportunities posed by different angling venues, including public access and mixed-use waters.

The work is also being supported by the Environment Agency and Natural England with further investigations underway to look at alternative methods of control such as male sterilisation.

American Mink

The American Mink is a small predator, which hunts both on land and in water. They are often mistaken for otters, but are in fact much smaller. Mink fur is dark brown and they have a white chin and lower jaw. Fish that have been killed by mink are sometimes assumed to have been killed by otters.

Mink escaped from fur farms in the UK in the 1950s and quickly became established in the wild. They kill fish, amphibians, rodents and birds. They are very destructive to several of our native species, but none so high profile as the water vole. Although the water vole has evolved with a natural suite of predators (ranging from herons to otters) none of these have the same capabilities of American mink. What makes mink different is the fact they can both swim and run extremely quickly, following the voles in and out of the water. Female and juvenile mink are also small enough to fit into the water vole's burrow, so the vole has no chance of escape. A female mink with young to feed is capable of killing all water voles found on a 1.5km stretch of riverbank, in a single breeding season.

There are numerous local schemes run by wildlife organisations to control mink numbers and the Angling Trust encourages all angling clubs and fisheries to consider taking part in these schemes to control mink predation.

Otters

The Angling Trust welcomes the Predation Action Group's publication 'The Big Picture' because it is a useful collation of the many reports of damage to fisheries from predation and confirms once again that there is a serious problem with predation, including by otters, on many still water fisheries and some rivers. Otter numbers have recovered successfully following the banning of the pesticide DDT and a programme of releasing captive-bred otters in the 1980s and early 1990s. There is no evidence of any releases since 1999.

The Angling Trust has set out an action plan to address the problem of otter predation.

The Trust will call for:

- An increase in the funding made available from the Environment Agency for fencing of still waters, and for it to be made available to club and syndicate waters; it is currently limited to those selling day tickets.
- The restoration of river ecosystems which can support healthy populations of fish that can withstand predation. Nearly 75% of rivers are failing to reach good ecological status and many of these are failing because of poor fish populations.
- Investment in research into methods for deterring otters from still water fisheries where fencing is not feasible. Current methods are not effective.
- Recognition by government agencies that reintroductions of otters were misguided and mismanaged, and that lessons must be learned for any future release programmes for other species.
- Acceptance from the government that ecosystems should be restored from the bottom up, rather than the top down. This means restoring river flows, tackling pollution and re-creating healthy habitat, rather than introducing top level predators and/or building otter holts to encourage them to live in a particular site.
- An end to the release of rehabilitated otters which have been injured fighting with other otters, or on the roads. It is thought that these otters have less fear of humans and can cause greater damage to fisheries. They are also highly likely to fight with other otters when they are released into their territories.
- Defra and the Environment Agency to accept that there is a serious problem from otter predation on many still-waters and some rivers and that the recovery of otters has now been successful.
- Defra and the Environment Agency to stop referring to otter numbers as evidence of successful restoration of river systems when the majority of rivers are failing to reach good ecological status and many fish populations are severely depleted.