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The Rt Hon Boris Johnson
The Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London
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8th March 2021

Via Email.

Dear Prime Minister,

You will not be surprised to learn of the concern and surprise caused in the UK's two million strong angling community at the publication of the recent report by the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation's on Fish Welfare. If it's flawed conclusions and recommendations were ever to be enacted into law, it would spell the end of most recreational fishing in this country.

If you've not seen it yet a copy can be found here -

<https://www.conservativeanimalwelfarefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/CAWF-Fish-Welfare-Report-1.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1geuknyuQu0dmEtxT26UbssjXleeJ6qsQBtzpGRXl9dkL2XZBBSdj8EAA>

At every election, the Angling Trust, as the national representative body for all forms of recreational fishing, publishes a Manifesto for Angling and invites endorsement from the major political parties. In the past, we have had strong statements of support from the Conservative Party, most notably in 2017 when you pledged -

The Conservative Party will continue to support angling and the numerous benefits – economic, environmental, social and health – it brings to communities and individuals alike.

It is difficult to square this and other statements you have made in support of angling with a report that suggests angling causes unnecessary cruelty to fish and is responsible for large scale mortalities.

Fundamental Flaws

There are a series of fundamental flaws in the report that are not supported by science or evidence. For example paragraph - 2.3 Hobbyist, Recreation, and Experimentation - states:

It is also worth noting that fish welfare issues are not confined to the food sector. There are also considerations to be made as to fishes used in other sectors, as well as for recreational purposes.

In recreational fishing, fish suffer from hook injuries, stress, and crowding when stored in buckets. Although no official statistics have been obtained, it is unlikely that every angler properly stuns the fish they catch to eat, meaning that fish may still be conscious while asphyxiating or being gutted.

Catch and release activities are also stressful for the fish and even when released back into the wild survival rates can be dramatically low.

*Some researchers suggest a **survival rate of only 1-2% for released fish** and up to 50% for crustaceans,⁷² while others suggest a mean survival of 18%.⁷³*

Regardless of what the exact survival rate is, from a welfare perspective catch and release remains a highly stressful event for fish from which they recover only slowly if they recover at all.

Taking the highlighted points in turn:

- Hook injuries have been radically minimised by the use of barbless, semi- barbed and circle hooks coupled with advances in techniques to avoid deep hooking
- Fish care by anglers has never been higher with the use of unhooking mats and cradles and even the application of antiseptic gel where obvious injuries are spotted whether caused by angling or not.
- The days are long gone when anglers used to retain fish in water filled buckets prior to returning them. If fish are retained at all they are in large, knotless keepnets or keep sacks made of soft, fish friendly material to minimise scale damage and loss of protective mucus.
- Survival rates following catch and release are nothing like the 1 or 2% figure quoted in the report. In the references below I have set out a number of respected and peer reviewed studies from around the world, including from our own Environment Agency which demonstrate average survival rates of well over 90% in most cases with a mean average of 95%. These are even higher in the case of coarse fishing in the U.K.

The Conservative Party report selectively quotes highly contested conclusions about fish feeling pain and seeks have them categorised as ‘sentient beings’ in legislation. It states:

Considering that wild fish are equally sentient, these commitments to humane slaughter should also be applicable to wild-caught fish.

- - *Fish are typically neglected in considerations of animal welfare in the UK. This is likely due to the categorisation of fish as unintelligent and unfeeling animals. However, UK researchers such as Lynne Sneddon and Victoria Braithwaite devoted their careers to removing these assumptions and showcasing the broad capabilities of fish. There is now a scientific consensus that fish experience pain.*

The Sneddon and Braithwaite studies have been dismantled by some of the world’s leading fisheries scientists including Professors James Rose, Robert Arlinghaus and Steven Cooke as shown in reference 6 below. They state:

“Fishes are neurologically equipped for unconscious nociception and emotional responses, but not conscious pain and feelings. In view of the necessity of consciousness as a precondition for pain experience claims have also been made for the existence of consciousness in fishes. Our assessment of these claims leads us to conclude that neither their rationale nor their supporting evidence is compelling, much less neurologically feasible.”

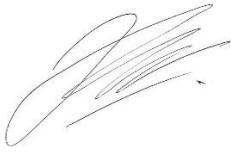
It is therefore disappointing that the authors of this report have chosen to cherry pick examples that fit their predetermined anti-fishing ideology rather than following facts and science.

Finally, I wish to draw your attention to their call for fish to be included in the provisions of the Animal Welfare Act 2006. As drafted such a move would immediately lead to legal challenges against both anglers and those who keep ornamental fish in either aquariums or garden ponds. It would be a gift to the animal rights extremists and a massive blow to our sport, which delivers up to £4bn in economic benefit, around 40,000 jobs and massive benefits to our health and wellbeing, as we have seen throughout the recent pandemic.

If this was just the musings of some independent think tank we could let it pass with minimal comment as a biased and flawed piece of ideologically driven nonsense. But because it's from the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation who enjoy close links to people at the heart of power in this country, we feel obliged to ask you or your ministers to publicly confirm your support for recreational fishing and to distance the Government from the conclusions of this highly contentious and inaccurate report.

I look forward to hearing from you and have sent a copy of this correspondence to colleagues on the All Party Parliamentary Group on Angling.

Yours sincerely.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jamie Cook', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Jamie Cook
CEO - Angling Trust

CC:

Rt Hon George Eustice, Secretary of State for the Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs
Sir Charles Walker MP, Chair – All Party Group for Angling.

Appendix 1

Conservative Manifesto Pledge

2017

The Conservative Party recognises the huge enjoyment that angling brings to millions of people across the country and the fact that it is one of our most accessible sports. Anglers not only make a significant contribution to the economy – around £3.5 billion a year – but they are the eyes and ears of our rivers and wider water environment, undertaking habitat restoration, clearing up litter and monitoring the health of our fish stocks. Every year, angling clubs and their members undertake valuable work restoring some of our most precious habitats such as our wonderful chalk streams.

We are committed to being the first generation to leave the environment in a better state than we found it and we will work with the angling community, harnessing its expertise and passion, to achieve this. The Conservative Party will continue to support angling and the numerous benefits – economic, environmental, social and health – it brings to communities and individuals alike.

David Beckingham - Conservative Campaign Headquarters

References

1. DPI Study NSW - <https://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/fishing/recreational/fishing-skills/catch-and-release>
2. Ferter, K et al. (2013) Unexpectedly high catch-and-release rates in European marine recreational fisheries: implications for science and management. ICES Journal of Marine Science. <https://doi.org/10.1093/icesjms/fst104>
3. Steven J. Cooke, Andy J. Danylchuka, Sascha E. Danylchuka, Cory D. Suskie, Tony L. Goldberga. Is catch-and-release recreational angling compatible with no-take marine protected areas? Ocean & Coastal Management 49 (2006) 342–354
4. European Sea Bass C&R Mortality Study - https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322594051_Estimating_post-release_mortality_of_European_sea_bass_based_on_experimental_angling
5. Catch and Release of Salmon - https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/637157/Impact_of_catch_and_release_angling_practices_on_survival_of_salmon_-_report.pdf
6. Can fish really feel pain? - <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/faf.12010>.