

## Introduction

Many English and Welsh angling clubs and fisheries have in recent years suffered a steady increase in unlawful access by paddlers which has prevented anglers fishing in peace and has affected the capital and amenity value of their fishing. There have been numerous incidents of aggressive behaviour in response to anglers asking paddlers to abide by the law. There have also been several organised trespass events, resulting in conflicts with other lawful river users, and, on occasion, the involvement of the police. British Canoeing, the national governing body for paddlers in England, have established an aggressive Clear 'Access, Clear Waters' campaign for universal access (at all times and to all rivers) irrespective of the impact on other water users. This has gained some traction in the media and with some politicians.

This media pack is designed to support riparian owners, fishing clubs and fisheries when dealing with the media on access issues.

It is no longer sufficient to simply state that paddlers have no right of access to our waters. Most anglers and angling clubs are not anti-paddling, they are happy to share access to their waters providing that this doesn't impact on their enjoyment of angling and the value of their fishing assets. We need to establish the facts and to articulate a reasoned argument for not permitting access, or we need to engage with other water users and negotiate Voluntary Access Agreements that permit increased access in way which protects the rights of all parties (see Voluntary Access Agreements – An Introductory Guide and Voluntary Access Agreements – A Practical Guide).

## Positioning angling in a positive light

Other water users have successfully positioned themselves in a positive light, championing the environment, campaigning against pollution, clearing up litter and so on. It is important that anglers promote the socio-economic benefits angling delivers and the wider work anglers undertake to protect and restore the environment and support their local communities.

- Angling remains one of the most popular participant sports in the UK and makes a significant contribution to employment, tourism, and the economy. It is enjoyed by over two million people, delivers £3.5 billion in economic benefit, and creates employment for around 40,000 people.

- Angling has been recognised as delivering significant benefits to people’s physical and mental wellbeing. Many charities are working with fishing clubs and fisheries utilising angling to help people recovering from cancer, servicemen and ex-servicemen recovering from physical and mental trauma, and children and young people with complex learning and physical disability needs. Many healthcare professionals are aware of how angling can form part of a solution to manage stress and anxiety and other mental health conditions in daily life through Social Prescribing.
- As well as contributing approximately £3.5 billion to the UK economy each year, all freshwater anglers in England and Wales are obliged to purchase a rod licence. They pay up to £82 to the Environment Agency or Natural Resources Wales for a rod licence (12-month, salmon, and sea trout) and the £25 million revenue from anglers’ rod licences contributes to the fisheries work of the Environment Agency in England and the work of Natural Resources Wales in Wales. This enables these bodies to pursue their statutory duty to maintain, improve and develop fisheries, as well as other functions in relation to pollution control and conservation. Anglers also pay to fish, whether that is through purchasing or leasing fishing rights, buying a day ticket or through membership of a club who in turn pays for their fishing rights. This is in addition to buying a licence. By contrast many paddlers pay nothing and increasingly expect to be able to paddle wherever they like and when they like without regard for the rights and enjoyment of other river users or the water environment.
- Rivers are a vital habitat, not only for fish, but a wide range of flora and fauna. This is widely recognised in the conservation designations widely applied to our rivers and streams and the special protection afforded to some species. Rivers are ‘closed’ environments and therefore particularly fragile and susceptible to human disturbance. Certain riverine species are in serious decline and some conservation designations necessarily restrict the operations and activities of owners themselves – including sometimes the use of watercraft.
- Individually and through riparian owner associations and angling clubs, owners and anglers voluntarily invest very considerable funds, time, and effort in the improvement of the river environment. These actions include:
  - routine riverfly monitoring as an indicator of river health;
  - monitoring of water quality and reporting of pollution incidents;
  - use of fly boards to increase abundance and range of invertebrates;
  - bankside improvement to reduce over shading and erosion;
  - deploying spawning boards to increase the range and abundance of fish species;
  - introduction of large woody debris creating fry refuges and variation in depth and flow;
  - reprofiling of the river course to increase sinuosity, increase flow and create more varied habitat;
  - installing leaky dams to slow flows and reduce flooding;

- tree planting to create riparian buffer zones which help to reduce flooding and pollution;
- pulling Himalayan Balsam or addressing other invasive non-native species;
- cleaning of gravels to improve spawning areas;
- counting redds or undertaking fish surveys to help understand fish abundance and diversity;
- organising litter picks or applying the 'Take 5' pledge;
- removal of impediments to migration.

It is clear that anglers and angling clubs are custodians of the river environment.

- In addition to the vast amount of environmental work many anglers volunteer their time to help with:
  - coaching young anglers, the future of the sport;
  - introducing new people to angling and the many benefits it provides;
  - the Voluntary Bailiff Service, protecting the environment and fishing by addressing poaching and fish theft and increasing rod licence compliance;
  - organising fishing events and helping at angling competitions;
  - running schools and community events;
  - raising funds for local charities and community groups.

They are a key part of the communities they live and fish in.

- Anglers have been at the heart of the fight against pollution on our rivers. The Anglers Co-operative Association (ACA), now the Angling Trust/Fish Legal, was formed in 1948 and thousands of anglers support the current Anglers Against Pollution campaign.

The contrast between the contribution of owners and anglers to rivers and their communities and that of other water users is stark. The latter contribute little or nothing whilst claiming the freedom of open access. Water sports activities such as paddling and wild swimming, if not properly managed, impact adversely not only on angling but on the environment, and ultimately on the socio-economic benefits outlined.

When dealing with the media, and the wider community, it is important to illustrate how riparian owners, angling clubs and anglers are contributing to improving the environment and delivering socio-economic benefits by providing specific local examples that link back to the overall benefits outlined above.

## Busting the paddling myths

Much of the paddling rhetoric is poorly founded or unfounded, yet is rarely challenged. It is important to put the record straight.

### The ‘public right of navigation’ myth

British Canoeing’s claim that there is a “*Public Right of Navigation (PRN) on all navigable rivers*” is simply untrue.

It is settled law that there is no general public right of navigation on non-tidal rivers in England and Wales. This is confirmed by the advice provided by David Hart QC in response to claims made by the Reverend Dr Douglas Caffyn (who is not a lawyer) in 2004 that there is a general public right of navigation, based only on the conclusions of his Masters’ thesis. Where navigation is allowed this is through Acts of Parliament (and other instruments) that are specific to a river or section of a river, or other water body. David Hart K.C. has provided extensive advice, see website, on the legal position regarding the law on navigation in England and Wales.

### The ‘less than 4%’ myth

The British Canoeing claim that “*of the 42,700 miles of inland waterways in England, only 1,400 miles can be paddled uncontested, that’s less than 4% of our rivers in England*” is also untrue.

In the research by Brighton University, that this claim is based upon, the researchers state that “*Public rights of navigation and water available for licensed navigation amount to 4,700 km (2,920 miles) of inland canals and major rivers in England and Wales (approximately a quarter of the major river and canal network)*”. Excluding Wales that is approximately 4,300 km (2,676 miles). The Inland Waterways Association says that “*There are 5,000 miles of canals and rivers that are navigable in Britain. 2,700 miles of UK canals and rivers are connected up to form a waterways network*” (2000 miles are either derelict or unrestored). Brighton University go on to highlight that “*There are also formal access agreements over 812 km (504 miles) of waterways that are not subject to a public right of navigation*” and that canoeists also have access to 11% of the nearly 1,000 enclosed waters of 1 hectare or more used for sport and recreation in England and Wales.

So, that would suggest there are at least 2,700 miles of river and canal available to paddlers in England (not the 1,400 miles stated by British Canoeing), which is just over 25% of the major river and canal network in England, plus 114 enclosed waters of 1 hectare or more in England. Not to mention over 2,700 miles of English coastline.

## The access reality

The paddlers aggressive campaigning is driven by a small number of fundamentalists who do not represent the views of the vast majority of paddlers or the reality of the demand for access.

The Covid pandemic and the restrictions introduced to address it led to vast numbers of people visiting the countryside with demand for access to green and blue spaces increasing significantly with a commensurate increase in conflict between different water users. But the reality is that the vast majority of people want to connect with nature in their own neighbourhoods. Unfortunately, such access is very limited. Rather than thinking about bringing people to nature we need to think about bringing nature to people. The Angling Trust has joined over 60 organisations in calling on government for a 'legal right to local nature' as part of the levelling up reforms.

In its conclusions the Brighton University research noted that *"There is little evidence of widespread unmet demand for inland water-based sport and recreation activities. Rather, there are specific 'hotspots' and sub-areas of England and Wales where demand is greater than supply, particularly for specific resources such as white water"*. They also observe that *"this chapter has already established that a considerable inland water resource exists in and around major urban areas. Perhaps as much as half of the enclosed water resource in major urban areas and their fringes is unused for water-based sport and recreation"*. Given that the majority of potential water users are looking for greater access to blue spaces in their neighbourhoods perhaps more focus on exploiting unused blue spaces would be more productive than taking up disputes on already utilised waters.

## British Canoeing are working to improve access for paddlers

British Canoeing have long campaigned to improve access for paddlers, although the latest strategy has shifted to a demand for open access. But British Canoeing refuse to engage in negotiating Voluntary Access Agreements (VAAs), the governments stated preferred route to facilitate increased access, with riparian owners and other interested parties. In fact, where VAAs had been successfully negotiated British Canoeing have demanded that local groups withdraw from such agreements. British Canoeing will *"not [support such agreements] on the basis of needing permission to paddle"*. Given the nature of the ownership of rivers and water bodies, it is not possible to have an agreement that does not include *"permission"* to access and navigate. Anglers need permission. There is no case for paddlers to be considered an exception. So even where riparian owners and local anglers or angling clubs and fisheries want to engage with British Canoeing to collaboratively negotiate a fair and equitable arrangement to provide access for paddlers, British Canoeing refuse to participate, potentially reducing access. Is that working in the interest of paddlers?

## British Canoeing are working to protect the environment

British Canoeing's latest 'Clear Access, Clear Waters' campaign states that they will *"Continue to act to protect and improve the health of our rivers, working to protect, preserve and enhance the natural environment"*. Despite producing some excellent guidance for paddlers on environmental good practice, nesting birds and spawning fish the Angling Trust is aware of a significant number of cases where paddlers have been seen trampling through marginal habitats where birds are nesting, stopping for toilet breaks on the riverbank, walking across or dragging craft over spawning gravels and redds, disturbing spawning fish, gathering around weirs and fish passes and hampering migratory fish. All contrary to their own advice and in some cases contravening the Salmon and Freshwater Fisheries Act (1975) or Wildlife & Countryside Act (1981). Inappropriate or illegal behaviours like these can have long term detrimental effects on riparian habitats, impact on already fragile fish stocks and on the enjoyment of other users. Commercial operators are often responsible and yet British Canoeing refuse to take any action or to address their members contraventions. Is this working to protect and improve the health of our rivers and the wider environment?

## Options for making the case

There are several ways of making the angling case and starting the bust the paddling myths:

- A. Press releases**
- B. Letters to the editor**
- C. Social media**

The media won't come and find you, you need to go out and engage the media and create a compelling reason for them to want to talk to you and present your position. Press releases are a great way to engage with print and broadcast journalists, but it is always at the journalist's discretion as to whether they are picked up, published, or broadcast.

It is important to keep an eye on the media and to see what coverage other water users are getting. Where paddlers and other water users successfully get coverage in the media it is always worth writing letters to the editor to present the angling perspective. This is particularly important if the press coverage is factually incorrect or misleading, or biased.

Social media gives you more control and can be a great way to bypass the mainstream media and get straight to the audience, and may also be picked up by journalists.

## A. Formulating a press release

The following will help you to formulate an effective press release that will get journalists attention.

### 1. Create a compelling headline

The headline needs to grab the journalists and the audience's attention. Keep it short and to the point and make sure it tells the story in one line. Include any keywords.

### 2. Formulate a newsworthy angle

Every good news story has an angle, or in other words, a perspective that your story will take. By setting up a clear perspective, you can attract more journalists looking for something newsworthy.

Great angles can include:

- Local impact - how is your story impacting the local community?
- Conflict - is your press release giving another side to a conflict?
- Progress - is your press release highlighting progress made towards a specific problem?
- Drama - does your press release evoke an emotional response for readers?

### 3. Summarise the key elements succinctly

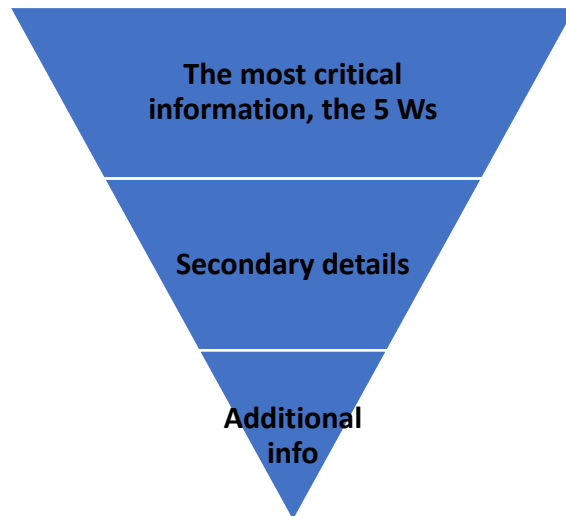
Some press releases employ a one sentence summary or bullet points at the start of the release to summarise the essential details. It makes it easier for the journalists to grasp the story and the angle.

- Keep bullet points to 1–3 medium-length concise sentences.
- Incorporate the 5 Ws.
- Add keywords and supporting keywords.
- Help the reader understand the story.
- Make the angle clear.
- Get the reader excited to learn more (e.g. state a question).

### 4. Put your most important information first

An effective press release format follows the 'inverted pyramid':

- 1) **The most critical information, the 5 Ws** – Who is the story about? What is happening? Where is it happening? When will/did it occur? Why is it important?
- 2) **Secondary details** – Quotes and other details in descending order of importance.
- 3) **Additional info** – Supporting information. Dates and times for events. Contact details.



## 5. Add media contact details

Reporters / journalists will need to know who to contact for more details. This section is provided at the end of a press release.

Make sure to include the following details:

- Point of contact - this should be a name and job title for who to reach.
- Email address - give them the best one to reach the preferred point of contact. You could also include a mailing address.
- Phone number - in case they'd like to call, rather than email.

## B. Writing to the editor

Where other water users have got positive media coverage for their cause, particularly in print media, it is worth writing to the editor, most magazines and newspapers have a letters page, to present the angling side of the argument. This is particularly important if the coverage is inaccurate, misleading, or biased. If you don't set the record straight, then people will assume the original article was correct. It may also generate an opportunity to put the angling side of the argument across in a further article or broadcast.

### Successful letters to the editor

- Keep it short and simple, no more than 300 words.
- Avoid development jargon and keep the language simple.
- Be opinionated but don't rant.
- Don't be afraid to be contentious; let your feelings be heard, newspapers like that.
- Name drop! Politicians will keep a careful eye on when and where their name is mentioned in the media. If you include the name of your MP or another key decision-maker, you can guarantee that they, or at least someone from their office, will take notice.



- Aim for a start, a middle and an end
  - Start - tell the reader what you're talking about. Put a hook in if you have one.
  - Middle - some facts about the issue.
  - End - what can the reader do? A call to action - or just to think about the issue.

If the media in question doesn't publish letters in this way but you feel that the coverage was inaccurate, misleading, or biased then writing a letter of complaint may be an alternative approach. This can sometimes result in corrections being published or present an opportunity to present your side of the argument.

## C. Using social media

Social media offers a powerful way of presenting the anglers/angling clubs position on all issues, including access. It's a great way of showing the wider world how much you are doing to restore and protect the environment, how much you are doing for your local communities, and to articulate a reasoning rational for your position on access.

It is important to think carefully about how you are going to use social media and to have a plan:

### 1. Where is your audience?

Before you set up a new Facebook page first think about who you want to be communicating with and which social media platforms they are using. Also think about which platforms the other water users who are looking for access use.

### 2. Build a presence on the right platforms

Once you know which platforms your audience are using you can set up accounts and create pages, if you haven't already.

### 3. Formulate a plan

What are you trying to achieve? Setting a goal or target will help you to focus efforts and identify the right.

How are you going to achieve your goal? What sort of content will help you reach your goal and how often do you need to post content. Little and often is more likely be more effective than a long post once in a while.

#### 4. Post regularly and effectively

Don't wait for something post worthy to happen, generate regular content that supports your strategy.

A picture paints a thousand words, photos and videos are more impactful than just a paragraph of text.

Keep posts short and to the point.

If you want people to do something as a result of reading the post (fill out a petition, attend an event, pick up some litter), make sure there is a clear call to action.

#### 5. Respond promptly to comments and direct messages

Check your accounts everyday and always respond to people comments, it shows you are interested and engaged. If people direct message you, respond immediately or send a holding message until you are able to do so.

#### 6. Don't ignore criticism

Not everyone is going to like what you say or do, or agree with your views and opinions. Don't take it personally. Ignoring people won't make them go away, show that you value their position, address their concerns or points of view factually and with well-founded arguments.

## Responding to questions

When dealing with the media or engaging with other water users you will have to deal with questions. Thinking through the sorts of questions you may be asked in advance will help you to prepare and provide factual, compelling, and persuasive responses.

Before doing an interview, it is worth rehearsing with a colleague or family member. Think of the questions you might get asked and ask your colleague or family member to play the role of the journalist. Then with them, rehearse your answers.

Try and make the main point you want to get across the first thing you say in your answer. Try and keep your answer short and to the point. Avoid jargon and/ technical and scientific language. Try and remember that you are talking to a person who knows nothing about the issue and speak to them in a way they would understand.