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MISSING IN ACTION

Anglers have a right to feel abandoned by the EA, argues Simon Cooper



HE MIGHT HAVE LIVED 25 CENTURIES ago but the Greek tragedian Euripides had it about right regarding the 21st century Environment Agency (EA) when he wrote, "Friends show their love in times of trouble, not in happiness." Now, before I attempt to eviscerate the EA for its absence of leadership during the Covid crisis, let me draw an important distinction: this is not about the frontline teams who daily get their hands wet and boots dirty.

As anglers we are a disparate bunch. We have our tribes. We find our niche. We might consider other disciplines of our sport slightly head scratching but for the most part fishing cuts across age, sex, class and ethnicity with few divides. We are natural bonders. We chat. We share the same jokes. We don't mind that non-believers think us one sandwich short of a picnic. In fact, we rather like that. But it does make us vulnerable in troubled times when we need a standard bearer to fight our corner.

And I believe that should be the EA. After all, it takes our money, threatening us with prosecution if we don't pay up. It uses the force of the law to impose regulations on angling to a level of detail that would never be countenanced by other pastimes. In return it looks after our rivers, fish and our sport. It's a pact. We accept one because we get the other. But when Covid struck the other went out the window as the EA fled to the hills. I believe it stands guilty of four failings: communication, leadership, licencing and fulfilment of its statutory duties. So, more or less in that order...

The EA has the largest database of all anglers in the UK, culled from licence purchases going back years; I'm guessing it runs to many millions. The total sum of its use in the lockdown was a March email suggesting that anglers spend their enforced downtime cleaning their tackle (wow, never thought of that) and the second in

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April reminded us to buy our rod licence precisely when we could not go fishing. Really? How clumsy and pointless.

Leadership? There was none. I don't recall seeing, reading or hearing anyone from the EA popping up in the national media making the case for us. Or our rivers. Or our fish. And if you owned or ran a lake you were cast adrift by the EA, who announced at the end of April (five weeks into lockdown) that it was not going to attend reported fish kills at stillwaters, and only the "most serious incidents" on our rivers, on the grounds of "an increased risk to our staff". Now, I don't get this risk: you drive to the lake; you take samples; record the incident; talk to the owner, respecting normal social-distancing protocols; you leave. When people are prepared to go to work to stack supermarket shelves, not to mention much higher-risk key workers, what planet is the EA living on?

The EA is the worst kind of friend. We deserve better. ■

Simon Cooper is managing director of Fishing Breaks (fishingbreaks.co.uk) the leading chalkstream fishing specialists. He is author of Life of a Chalkstream and The Otters' Tale.