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HE WHO PAYS...

Simon Cooper questions the independence of the Angling Trust



I RECALL, SOME YEARS AGO, ATTENDING an awards evening for a well-known fish conservation body where the guest of honour, and the man standing for the grip 'n' grin photos with the winners was none other than the CEO of an equally well-known water company. Why was he there? Well, his publicly listed company was the headline sponsor for the conservation body that year.

I did rather wonder at the time how this was a good idea (I was slightly ahead of the curve on the sewage issue) so quizzed the CEO of the conservation body whether he thought getting into bed with the enemy was such a good idea. Back came the apparently reasonable rationale that policy could only be influenced from within the tent. I was doubtful then and I don't think many would argue that recent events have proved me correct.

I was put in mind of all that when I read a recent Environment Agency (EA) press release that included a quote from Jamie Cook, Angling Trust CEO, in response to the EA proposal to increase the cost of the fishing licence from April 1, 2023. Cook said, "Nobody likes to see prices rise, especially in these tough times, but it is important that our rod-licence income is protected for vital fisheries work. These modest increases – the first for six years – are necessary to ensure that angling continues to receive professional support from the Environment Agency."

Though I have a principled objection to the existence of the fishing licence, as I have opined in this column before, I don't have much issue with the quantum of the increases (though the word modest might be pushing it) over the next three years: 10%, 8.4% and 2.2%. Frankly, I have no idea why it was held for six years. However, what I don't like is to see an apparently independent body like the Angling Trust so enthusiastically falling in line with the increase.

Why might that be, you may well ask?

Now, I have a lot of time for Jamie Cook. He took the lead in the early days of Covid, responsible for making the case to release angling from lockdown way ahead of everyone else and much of the current surge in the interest in fishing can be traced back to that time. But the accounts for the Angling Trust in 2020/21 may offer you a clue as to the answer to the question.

Last year, the Angling Trust received a revenue grant from the EA of £1,101,521, which represented 38% of their income, considerably more than the £791,802 from membership income. The money is paid to the Trust as a contractor for the EA for the delivery of the current National Angling Strategic Services contract. Now, I have no idea how well or badly the Angling Trust delivers that contract. I have no idea whether it represents value for our licence money, though I have some doubts. But what I do know is that it represents a potential conflict of interest.

I know of hardly anyone in our industry who would stand up in a public forum to give an outright defence of the EA. As a body charged with protecting and improving our rivers it has palpably failed. As such it needs to be held to account for its failings and the Angling Trust, with its many spheres of influence, should be in the vanguard of this reckoning.

It is time for the Angling Trust to divest itself of the EA contract to become, once again, a truly independent voice for the angling community. ■

Simon Cooper is managing director of Fishing Breaks, the leading chalkstream fishing specialists. He is author of Life of a Chalkstream and The Otters' Tale. Follow his fortnightly blog on saving our rivers at fishingbreaks.co.uk